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(54) Title: METHOD FOR ISOLATING HEPATITIS C VIRUS PEPTIDES

(57) Abstract: Described is a method for isolating Hepatitis C Virus peptides (HPs) which have a binding capacity to a MHC/HLA molecule or a complex comprising said HCV-peptide and said MHC/HLA molecule characterized by the following steps: - providing a pool of HCV-peptide, said pool containing HCV-peptides which bind to said MHC/HLA molecule and HCV-peptides which do not bind to said MHC/HLA molecule, - contacting said MHC/HLA molecule with said pool of HCV-peptides whereby a HCV-peptide which has a binding capacity to said MHC/HLA molecule binds to said MHC/HLA molecule and a complex comprising said HCV-peptide and said MHC/HLA molecule is formed, - detecting and optionally separating said complex from the HCV-peptide which do not bind to said MHC/HLA molecule and optionally isolating and characterising the HCV-peptide from said complex.

## Method for Isolating Hepatitis C Virus Peptides

The present invention relates to a method for isolating HCV-peptides, especially for isolating HCV T cell epitopes which have a binding capacity to a MHC/HLA molecule.

The immune system is a complex network of inter-related cell types and molecules, which has evolved in order to protect multicellular organisms from infectious microorganisms. It can be divided into the evolutionary older innate (or natural) immunity and adaptive (or acquired) immunity. The innate immune system recognizes patterns, which are usually common and essential for pathogens. For this limited number of molecular structures germline encoded receptors have evolved. By contrast, cells of the adaptive immune system - B and T lymphocytes - can recognize a huge variety of antigenic structures. The receptors, termed according to the cell types expressing them, B cell receptor (BCR, its soluble versions are called antibodies) and T cell receptor (TCR, only cell-surface associated forms) are generated by somatic recombination and show a clonal distribution. Thus, initially there is only small number of cells with a certain specificity. Upon antigen encounter these cells start to divide (clonal expansion) to generate an effector population able to cope with the antigen. After elimination of antigen a specialized sub-population of cells specifically recognizing this antigen remains as immunological memory. Taken together the adaptive immune system is slow (compared to innate immunity), however specific and it improves upon repeated exposure to a given pathogen/antigen.

T cells have a central role in adaptive immunity. Their receptors (TCRs) recognize "major histocompatibility complex" (MHC or HLA):peptide complexes on the surface of cells. These peptides are called T cell epitopes and represent degradation products of antigens. There are two major classes of T cells: CD8-positive cytotoxic T cells (CTL) are restricted to MHC class I. CD4-positive helper T cells (HTL) are restricted to MHC class II. HTL are essential for many features of adaptive immunity: activation of so called "professional antigen-presenting cells" (APCs), immunoglobulin (Ig) class switch, the germinal center reaction and

Ig affinity maturation, activation of CTL, immunological memory, regulation of the immune response and others.

MHC molecules collect peptides inside the cell and present them on the cell surface to TCRs of T cells. There are two major classes of MHC, class I recognized by CD8-positive CTL and class II recognized by CD4-positive HTL.

MHC class I molecules consist of a membrane-anchored alpha-chain of 45 kDa and the non-covalently attached  $\beta_2$ -microglobulin ( $\beta_2m$ ) of 12 kDa. Resolution of the 3-dimensional structure by X-ray crystallography (Stern and Wiley 1994) revealed that the alpha-chain possesses a cleft, which is closed at both ends and accommodates peptides from 8 to 11 amino acids length. Class I molecules are ubiquitously expressed, and the peptides they present originate from cytoplasmic proteins. These are degraded by the proteasome, and the resulting peptides are actively transported into the endoplasmatic reticulum (ER). There, with the help of several chaperones, MHC:peptide complexes are formed and transported to the cell surface (Heemels 1995). Thus, MHC class I mirrors the proteome of a cell on its surface and allows T cells to recognize intracellular pathogens or malignant cells.

MHC class II molecules consist of two membrane-anchored proteins (alpha- and beta-chain) of 35 kDa and 30 kDa, respectively. These together form a cleft, open at both ends, which can accommodate peptides of variable length, usually from 12 to 25 amino acids. Despite these differences, class I and II molecules share surprising structural similarity (Stern and Wiley 1994). Class II molecules are only expressed on professional APC including dendritic cells (DC), B-cells and macrophages/monocytes. These cells are specialized in taking up and processing antigens in the endosomal pathway. Immediately after their biosynthesis, class II molecules are complexed by the so-called invariant chain (Ii), which prevents binding of peptides in the ER. When vesicles containing class II:Ii complexes fuse with endosomes containing degradation products of exogenous antigen, Ii is degraded until the MHC binding cleft is only complexed by the so-called CLIP peptide. The latter is with the help of chaperones like HLA-DM exchanged by antigenic peptides (Villadangos 2000).

Finally, MHC:peptide complexes are again presented on the surface of APCs, which interact in numerous ways with HTL.

Being both polygenic and extremely polymorphic, the MHC system is highly complex. For the class I alpha-chain in humans there are three gene loci termed HLA-A, -B and -C. Likewise, there are three class II alpha-chain loci (DRA, DQA, DPA); for class II beta-chain loci the situation is even more complex as there are four different DR beta-chains (DRB1,2,3,5) plus DQB and DPB. Except the monomorphic DR alpha-chain DRA, each gene locus is present in many different alleles (dozens to hundreds) in the population (Klein 1986). Different alleles have largely distinct binding specificities for peptides. Alleles are designated, for example, HLA-A\*0201 or HLA-DRB1\*0401 or HLA-DPA\*0101/DPB\*0401.

T cell epitopes have been identified by a variety of approaches (Van den Eynde 1997). T cell lines and clones have for instance been used to screen cDNA expression libraries for instance in the context of COS cells transfected with the appropriate HLA-molecule. Alternatively, biochemical approaches have been pursued. The latter involved elution of natural ligands from MHC molecules on the surface of target cells, the separation of these peptides by several chromatography steps, analysis of their reactivity with lymphocytes in epitope reconstitution assays and sequencing by mass spectrometry (Wölfel et al. 1994, Cox et al. 1994).

Recently the advent of highly sensitive cytokine detection assays like the IFN-gamma ELISpot allowed using lymphocytes directly ex vivo for screening of overlapping synthetic peptides (Maecker 2001, Kern 2000, Tobery 2001). Primarily, Kern et al. (1999&2000) used arrays of pools of overlapping 9mer peptides to map CD8+ T cell epitopes in vitro. Later, Tobery et al., 2001 modified this approach and demonstrated that pools containing as many as 64 20mer peptides may be used to screen for both CD8+ and CD4+ T cell epitopes in mice. Both these methods were based on the monitoring of antigen-specific response by measuring INF-gamma production either by intracellular staining (Kern et al 2000) or in ELISpot assay (Tobery et al., 2001). By use of mixtures of 15-mers the CD4+ T cell responses are approximately

equal to those detected when whole soluble protein was used as an antigen, while -not surprising- the CD8+ T cell responses are significantly higher than the often negligible responses detected with soluble protein stimulation. Furthermore, the CD8+ T cell responses to a mixture of 15 amino acid peptides are similar to those obtained with a mix of 8-12 amino acid peptides, selected to represent known MHC class I minimal epitopes. Most probably peptidases associated with the cell membrane are responsible for "clipping" peptides to optimal length under these circumstances (Maecker et al, 2001).

An interesting alternative is to screen synthetic combinatorial peptide libraries with specific lymphocytes. For instance, a decapeptide library consisting of 200 mixtures arranged in a positional scanning format, has been successfully used for identification of peptide ligands that stimulate clonotypic populations of T cells (Wilson, et al., J. Immunol., 1999, 163:6424-6434).

Many T cell epitopes have been identified by so called "Reverse immunological approaches" (Rammensee 1999). In this case the protein giving rise to a potential T cell epitope is known, and its primary sequence is scanned for HLA binding motifs. Typically dozens to hundreds of candidate peptides or even a full set of overlapping peptides are synthesized and tested for binding to HLA molecules. Usually, the best binders are selected for further characterization with regard to their reactivity with T cells. This can for instance be done by priming T cells in vitro or in vivo with the help of HLA transgenic mice.

Hepatitis C Virus (HCV) is a member of the flaviviridae chronically infecting about 170 million people worldwide. There are at least 6 HCV genotypes and more than 50 subtypes have been described. In America, Europe and Japan genotypes 1, 2 and 3 are most common. The geographic distribution of HCV genotypes varies greatly with genotype 1a being predominant in the USA and parts of Western Europe, whereas 1b predominates in Southern and Central Europe (Bellentani 2000).

HCV is transmitted through the parenteral or percutan route, and

replicates in hepatocytes. About 15% of patients experience acute self-limited hepatitis associated with viral clearance and recovery. About 80% of infected persons become chronic carriers. Infection often persists asymptotically with slow progression for years, however ultimately HCV is a major cause of cirrhosis, end-stage liver disease and liver cancer (Liang 2000). Strength and quality of both HTL and CTL responses determine whether patients recover (spontaneously or as a consequence of therapy) or develop chronic infection (Liang 2000).

Standard therapy of HCV comprises a combination of pegylated interferon-alpha and the antiviral ribavirin. Virologic responses are, depending on the genotype, achieved in about 50% of HCV patients. The low tolerability and the considerable side effects of this therapy clearly necessitate novel therapeutic intervention including therapeutic vaccines (Cornberg 2002). However, presently the detailed understanding of which epitopes in which MHC combination lead to successful immune responses is lacking (Ward 2002). Therefore, a comprehensive analysis of the T-cell response against the entire HCV is required for development of therapeutic epitope-based vaccines.

The HCV virion contains a 9.5-kilobase positive single-strand RNA genome encoding a large single polyprotein of about 3000 amino acids. The latter is processed to at least 10 proteins by both host and HCV-encoded proteolytic activities (Liang 2000). Importantly, the HCV RNA-dependent RNA polymerase is error prone giving rise to the evolution of viral quasiespecies and contributing to immune-escape variants (Farci 2000).

It is an object of the present invention to provide a method for screening HCV-peptides for specific MHC molecules, preferably for delivering suitable and specific HCV T cell epitopes selected from a variety of HCV-peptides having unknown specificity for a given MHC molecule and thereby to provide efficient means for preventing and combatting HCV infections.

Therefore the present invention provides a method for isolating HCV-peptides which have a binding capacity to a MHC/HLA molecule or a complex comprising said HCV-peptide and said MHC/HLA mo-

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le molecule which method comprises the following steps:

- providing a pool of HCV-peptides, said pool containing HCV-peptides which bind to said MHC/HLA molecule and HCV-peptides which do not bind to said MHC/HLA molecule,
- contacting said MHC/HLA molecule with said pool of HCV-peptides whereby a HCV-peptide which has a binding capacity to said MHC/HLA molecule binds to said MHC/HLA molecule and a complex comprising said HCV-peptide and said MHC/HLA molecule is formed,
- detecting and optionally separating said complex from the HCV-peptides which do not bind to said MHC/HLA molecule and
- optionally isolating and characterising the HCV-peptide from said complex.

The present invention also provides a method for isolating HCV T cell epitopes which have a binding capacity to a MHC/HLA molecule or a complex comprising said epitope and said MHC/HLA molecule which method comprises the following steps:

- providing a pool of HCV-peptides, said pool containing HCV-peptides which bind to a MHC/HLA molecule and HCV-peptides which do not bind to said MHC/HLA molecule,
- contacting said MHC/HLA molecule with said pool of HCV-peptides whereby a HCV-peptide which has a binding capacity to said MHC/HLA molecule binds to said MHC/HLA molecule and a complex comprising said HCV-peptide and said MHC/HLA molecule is formed,
- detecting and optionally separating said complex from the HCV-peptides which do not bind to said MHC/HLA molecule,
- optionally isolating and characterising the HCV-peptide from said complex,
- assaying said optionally isolated HCV-peptide or said complex in a T cell assay for T cell activation capacity and
- providing the optionally isolated HCV-peptide with a T cell activation capacity as HCV T cell epitope or as complex.

The method according to the present invention enables a screening system for screening binding capacity to specific MHC/HLA molecules. Identifying MHC binding molecules is an important tool for molecular characterisation of pathogens, tumors, etc. It is therefore possible with the present invention to screen a

variety (a "pool") of potential HCV-peptides as ligands at once for their functional affinity towards MHC molecules. Binding affinity towards MHC molecules is also a necessary prerequisite for HCV-peptides intended to be used as T cell epitopes, although not a sufficient one. Suitable HCV T cell epitope candidates have also to be screened and assayed with respect to their T cell activation capacity. The combination of the screening method for binding according to the present invention with a suitable T cell assay therefore provides the method for isolating HCV T cell epitopes according to the present invention wherein such T cell epitopes are identifiable out of a pool of potential HCV-peptides using an MHC binding assay.

In contrast to the prior art, where such assays have always been performed on ligands with known binding/MHC specificity, the methods according to the present invention provide such assays as a screening tool for pools with ligands of unknown specificity. In the prior art such assays have been typically performed on individual single ligands, to test their binding affinity to MHC/HLA molecules. In Kwok et al. (2001) pools of maximally up to 5 overlapping synthetic peptides were used to generate MHC class II tetramers; the latter were then used to stain PBMC for T cells specific for particular MHC class II:peptide complexes which were generated in the binding reaction with the pools of 5 peptides. However, an increase in the number of ligands per pool in such an approach was not regarded as being possible, both for sensitivity and specificity reasons (Novak et al. 2001). A problem with regard to specificity would be the generation of MHC tetramers with more than one binder per tetramer, if more than one binder would be present in the pool. This would preclude staining of T cells, which is used for identification of epitopes in the approach described in the prior art. In strong contrast to that the approach according to the present invention allows the identification of more than one binder out of highly complex mixtures containing more than one binder.

The nature of the pool to be screened with the present invention is not critical: the pools may contain any naturally or not naturally occurring HCV-peptide which a) binds specifically to



MHC/HLA molecules and/or b) may be specifically recognized by T cells. The binding properties of the set of HCV-peptides of the pool with respect to MHC molecules is not known; therefore, usually binders and at least a non-binder for a given MHC molecule are contained in the pool. The pool therefore comprises at least ten different HCV-peptides. Practically, pools are used according to the present invention containing significantly more different HCV-peptide species, e.g. 20 or more, 100 or more, 1.000 or more or 10.000 or more. It is also possible to screen larger libraries (with e.g. more than  $10^6$ , more than  $10^8$  or even more than  $10^{10}$  different HCV-peptide species). This, however, is mainly dependent on the availability of such HCV-peptide libraries.

Preferred pools of ligands to be used in the method according to the present invention are selected from the group consisting of a pool of peptides, especially overlapping peptides, a pool of protein fragments, a pool of modified peptides, a pool obtained from antigen-presenting cells, preferably in the form of total lysates or fractions thereof, especially fractions eluted from the surface or the MHC/HLA molecules of these cells, a pool comprised of fragments of cells, especially HCV containing cells, tumor cells or tissues, especially from liver, a pool comprised of peptide libraries, pools of (poly)-peptides generated from recombinant DNA libraries, especially derived from pathogens or (liver) tumor cells, a pool of proteins and/or protein fragments from HCV or mixtures thereof.

The HCV-peptides of the pools may be derived from natural sources (in native and/or derivatised form) but also be produced synthetically (e.g. by chemical synthesis or by recombinant technology). If (poly)peptide ligands are provided in the pools, those peptides are preferably generated by peptide synthesizers or by recombinant technology. According to a preferred embodiment, a pool of (poly)peptides may be generated from recombinant DNA libraries, e.g. derived from HCV or HCV containing (tumor) cells, by in vitro translation (e.g. by ribosome display) or by expression through heterologous hosts like E.coli or others.

The nature of the specific MHC molecules (of course also MHC-

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like molecules are encompassed by this term) to be selected for the present methods is again not critical. Therefore, these molecules may be selected in principle from any species, especially primates like humans (HLA, see below), chimpanzees, other mammals, e.g. macaques, rabbits, cats, dogs or rodents like mice, rats, guinea pigs and others, agriculturally important animals like cattle, horses, sheep and fish, although human (or "humanized") molecules are of course preferred for providing vaccines for humans. For providing vaccines for specific animals, especially agriculturally important animals, like cattle, horses, sheep and fish, the use of MHC molecules being specific for these animals is preferred.

Preferred HLA molecules therefore comprise Class I molecules derived from the HLA-A, -B or -C loci, especially A1, A2, A3, A24, A11, A23, A29, A30, A68; B7, B8, B15, B16, B27, B35, B40, B44, B46, B51, B52, B53; Cw3, Cw4, Cw6, Cw7; Class II molecules derived from the HLA-DP, -DQ or -DR loci, especially DR1, DR2, DR3, DR4, DR7, DR8, DR9, DR11, DR12, DR13, DR51, DR52, DR53; DP2, DP3, DP4; DQ1, DQ3, DQ5, DQ6; and non-classical MHC/HLA and MHC/HLA-like molecules, which can specifically bind ligands, especially HLA-E, HLA-G, MICA, MICB, Qa1, Qa2, T10, T18, T22, M3 and members of the CD1 family.

According to a preferred embodiment, the methods according to the present invention is characterised in that said MHC/HLA molecules are selected from HLA class I molecules, HLA class II molecules, non classical MHC/HLA and MHC/HLA-like molecules or mixtures thereof, or mixtures thereof.

Preferably, the optional characterising step of the HCV-peptides of the complex is performed by using a method selected from the group consisting of mass spectroscopy, polypeptide sequencing, binding assays, especially SDS-stability assays, identification of ligands by determination of their retention factors by chromatography, especially HPLC, or other spectroscopic techniques, especially violet (UV), infra-red (IR), nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR), circular dichroism (CD) or electron spin resonance (ESR), or combinations thereof.

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According to a preferred embodiment the method of the present invention is characterised in that it is combined with a cytokine secretion assay, preferably with an ELISPOT assay, an intracellular cytokine staining, FACS or an ELISA (enzyme-linked immunoassays) (see e.g. Current Protocols in Immunology).

Preferred T cell assays comprise the mixing and incubation of said complex with isolated T cells and subsequent measuring cytokine secretion or proliferation of said isolated T cells and/or the measuring up-regulation of activation markers, especially CD69, CD38, or down-regulation of surface markers, especially CD3, CD8 or TCR and/or the measuring up-/down-regulation of mRNAs involved in T cell activation, especially by real-time RT-PCR (see e.g. Current Protocols in Immunology, Current Protocols in Molecular Biology).

Further preferred T cell assays are selected from T cell assays measuring phosphorylation/de-phosphorylation of components downstream of the T cell receptor, especially p56 lck, ITAMS of the TCR and the zeta chain, ZAP70, LAT, SLP-76, fyn, and lyn, T cell assays measuring intracellular  $Ca^{++}$  concentration or activation of  $Ca^{++}$ -dependent proteins, T cell assays measuring formation of immunological synapses, T cell assays measuring release of effector molecules, especially perforin, granzymes or granulolysin or combinations of such T cell assays (see e.g. Current Protocols in Immunology, Current Protocols in Cell Biology).

In order to identify the molecular determinants of immune-protection against HCV a specific method of epitope capturing was applied using synthetic peptides representing the conserved parts of HCV genotypes 1, 2 and 3. Focusing on conserved regions ensures broad applicability of the epitopes. Moreover, these regions probably cannot easily be mutated by the virus, thus minimizing the danger of evolution of immune-escape variants.

With the methods of the present invention novel HCV-epitopes are detected. According to a further aspect, the present invention therefore also provides HCV T cell epitopes identifiable by a method according to the present invention, said T cell epitopes preferably being selected from the group consisting of poly-

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peptides comprising the peptides A120-A124, B25-B30, B46-B48, B84-B92, C106, C113-C114, 1627, 1628, 1629, 1604 according to Table 1 or 2. These peptides are novel ligands for at least HLA-DRB1\*0101, \*0401, \*0404, \*0701 and thus covering at least 45-55% of major populations (see Tab. 2).

Preferred polypeptides are selected from the group comprising the peptides 1630, C97, 1547, B94-B98, A272-A276 according to Table 1 or 2. These peptides are novel ligands for at least HLA-DRB1\*0101, \*0401, \*0701 and thus covering at least 40-50% of major populations (see Tab. 2).

Preferred polypeptides are selected from the group comprising the peptides B120, B122, C108, C134, C152 according to Table 1 or 2. These peptides are novel ligands for at least HLA-DRB1\*0101, \*0404, \*0701 and thus covering at least 45% of major populations (see Tab. 2).

Preferred polypeptides are selected from the group comprising the peptides 1606, 1607, 1577, 1578 according to Table 1 or 2. These peptides are novel ligands for at least HLA-DRB1\*0401, \*0404, \*0701 and thus covering at least 45% of major populations (see Tab. 2).

Preferred polypeptides are selected from the group comprising the peptides B50-52, 1623, C130 according to Table 1 or 2. These peptides are novel ligands for at least HLA-DRB1\*0101, \*0401, \*0404 and thus covering at least 40% of major populations (see Tab. 2).

Preferred polypeptides are selected from the group comprising the peptides 1603, C96 according to Table 1 or 2. These peptides are novel ligands for at least HLA-DRB1\*0101, \*0701 and thus covering at least 40% of major populations (see Tab. 2).

Preferred polypeptides are selected from the group comprising the peptides C191 according to Table 1, being a novel ligand for at least HLA-DRB1\*0401, \*0701 and thus covering at least 40% of major populations (see Tab. 2).

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Preferred polypeptides are selected from the group comprising the peptides A216-A224, A242-A244, C92-C93 according to Table 1 or 2. These peptides are novel ligands for at least HLA-DRB1\*0101, \*0401 and thus covering at least 35% of major populations (see Tab. 2).

Preferred polypeptides are selected from the group comprising the peptide A174 according to Table 1 or 2, being a novel ligand for at least HLA-DRB1\*0404, \*0701 and thus covering at least 25-30% of major populations (see Tab. 2).

Preferred polypeptides are selected from the group comprising the peptides B32-B38, B100-B102, C135 according to Table 1 or 2. These peptides are novel ligands for at least HLA-DRB1\*0101, \*0404 and thus covering at least 20-25% of major populations (see Tab. 2).

Preferred polypeptides are selected from the group comprising the peptide C162 according to Table 1 or 2, being a novel ligand for at least HLA-DRB1\*0401, \*0404 and thus covering at least 20-25% of major populations (see Tab. 2).

Preferred polypeptides are selected from the group comprising the peptides 1618, 1622, 1624, 1546, 1556 according to Table 1 or 2. These peptides are novel ligands for at least HLA-DRB1\*0701 and thus covering at least 25% of major populations (see Tab. 2).

Preferred polypeptides are selected from the group comprising the peptides A114, B58, B112-B118, B18-B22, C112, C116, C122, C127, C144, C159-C160, C174, 1558, 1581 according to Table 1 or 2. These peptides are novel ligands for at least HLA-DRB1\*0101 and thus covering at least 20% of major populations (see Tab. 2).

Preferred polypeptides are selected from the group comprising the peptide C95, being a novel ligand for at least HLA-DRB1\*0401 and thus covering at least 20% of major populations (see Tab. 2).

Preferred polypeptides are selected from the group comprising the peptides C129, C157-C158, A254-A258, 1605, C109, C161 according to Table 1 or 2. These peptides comprising novel ligands for at least HLA-DRB1\*0404 and thus covering at least 5% of major populations (see Tab. 2).

Preferred polypeptides are selected from the group comprising the peptides 1547, 1555, 1558, 1559, 1560, 1563, 1592, 1604, 1605, 1616, 1621, 1623, 1625, 1627, 1630, 1649, 1650, 1651, 1652, 1654, 1655, 1656 according to Table 1 or 2, these peptides displaying immunogenicity in HLA-DRB1\*0401 transgenic mice (see Example II) and thus representing or containing a confirmed HLA class II T-cell epitope binding to at least HLA-DRB1\*0401 (see Tab. 3).

Preferred polypeptides are selected from the group comprising the peptides 1545, 1552, 1555, 1558, 1559, 1560, 1577, 1592, 1604, 1605, 1615, 1617, 1621, 1627, 1631, 1632, 1641, 1647, 1650, 1651, 1652, 1653, 1654, 1655 according to Table 1 or 2, these peptides displaying immunogenicity in HLA-A\*0201 transgenic mice (see Example II) and thus representing or containing a confirmed HLA class I T-cell epitope binding to at least HLA-A\*0201 (see Tab. 3).

Preferred polypeptides which are shown to be HLA-B\*0702 epitopes with T-cell activating capacity are selected from the group consisting of polypeptides 1506, 1526, 1547, 1552, 1553, 1555, 1558, 1562, 1563, 1565, 1577, 1578, 1580, 1587, 1592, 1604, 1605, 1621, 1623, 1624, 1627, 1628, 1647, 1650, 1651, 1843 with sequence LPRRGPR (contained in 1506) and 1838 with sequence SP-GALVVGVI (contained in 1587) as minimal HLA-B\*0702 epitopes.

Peptides 1526, 1565, 1631 are also shown to be immunogenic in HLA-DRB1\*0401 transgenic mice contain known class II epitopes. Peptides 1526, 1553, 1565, 1587, 1623, 1630 are also shown to be immunogenic in HLA-A\*0201 transgenic mice contain known A2 epitopes.

Preferred polypeptides are selected from the group comprising

the peptides listed in tables 3, 5 and the bold peptides in 7 ("hotspots").

The preferred polypeptides mentioned above also include all fragments containing the minimal sequence of the epitope, i.e. the 8- or 9-mer being necessary for binding to MHC/HLA molecules.

Preferably, the epitopes or peptides according to the present invention further comprises 1 to 30, preferably 2 to 10, especially 2 to 6, naturally occurring amino acid residues at the N-terminus, the C-terminus or at the N- and C-terminus. For the purposes of the present invention the term "naturally occurring" amino acid residue relates to amino acid residues present in the naturally occurring protein at the specific position, relative to the epitope or peptide. For example, for the HLA-A2 epitope with the amino acid sequence **HMWNFISGI** contained within peptide ID 1565 (Tab. 1), the naturally occurring amino acid residue at the N-terminus is -K; the three naturally occurring amino acid residues at the C-terminus are -QYL. A "non-naturally occurring" amino acid residue is therefore any amino acid residue being different as the amino acid residue at the specific position relative to the epitope or peptide.

According to a preferred embodiment of the present invention, the present epitopes or peptides further comprise non-naturally occurring amino acid(s), preferably 1 to 1000, more preferred 2 to 100, especially 2 to 20 non-naturally occurring amino acid residues, especially at the N-terminus, the C-terminus or at the N- and C-terminus. Also combinations of non-naturally and naturally occurring amino acid residues are possible under this specific preferred embodiment. The present epitope may also contain modified amino acids (i.e. amino acid residues being different from the 20 "classical" amino acids, such as D-amino acids or S-S bindings of Cys) as additional amino acid residues or in replacement of a naturally occurring amino acid residue.

It is clear that also epitopes or peptides derived from the present epitopes or peptides by amino acid exchanges improving, conserving or at least not significantly impeding the T cell ac-

tivating capability of the epitopes are covered by the epitopes or peptides according to the present invention. Therefore, the present epitopes or peptides also cover epitopes or peptides, which do not contain the original sequence as derived from a specific strain of HCV, but trigger the same or preferably an improved T cell response. These epitopes are referred to as "heteroclitic". These include any epitope, which can trigger the same T cells as the original epitope and has preferably a more potent activation capacity of T cells preferably in vivo or also in vitro. Also the respective homologous epitopes from other strains of HCV are encompassed by the present invention.

Heteroclitic epitopes can be obtained by rational design i.e. taking into account the contribution of individual residues to binding to MHC/HLA as for instance described by Ramensee et al. 1999 or Sturniolo et al. 1999, combined with a systematic exchange of residues potentially interacting with the TCR and testing the resulting sequences with T cells directed against the original epitope. Such a design is possible for a skilled man in the art without much experimentation.

Another possibility includes the screening of peptide libraries with T cells directed against the original epitope. A preferred way is the positional scanning of synthetic peptide libraries. Such approaches have been described in detail for instance by Blake et al 1996 and Hemmer et al. 1999 and the references given therein.

As an alternative to epitopes represented by the cognate HCV derived amino acid sequence or heteroclitic epitopes, also substances mimicking these epitopes e.g. "peptidemimetica" or "retro-inverso-peptides" can be applied.

Another aspect of the design of improved epitopes is their formulation or modification with substances increasing their capacity to stimulate T cells. These include T helper cell epitopes, lipids or liposomes or preferred modifications as described in WO 01/78767.

Another way to increase the T cell stimulating capacity of epi-



topes is their formulation with immune stimulating substances for instance cytokines or chemokines like interleukin-2, -7, -12, -18, class I and II interferons (IFN), especially IFN-gamma, GM-CSF, TNF-alpha, flt3-ligand and others.

According to a further aspect, the present invention is drawn to the use of a HCV epitope or HCV peptide according to the present invention for the preparation of a HLA restricted vaccine for treating or preventing hepatitis C virus (HCV) infections.

The invention also encompasses the use of an epitope according to the present invention for the preparation of a vaccine for treating or preventing hepatitis C virus (HCV) infections.

Consequently, the present invention also encompasses a vaccine for treating or preventing hepatitis C virus (HCV) infections comprising an epitope according to the present invention.

Furthermore, also a HLA specific vaccine for treating or preventing hepatitis C virus (HCV) infections comprising the epitopes or peptides according to the present invention is an aspect of the present invention.

Preferably, such a vaccine further comprises an immunomodulating substance, preferably selected from the group consisting of polycationic substances, especially polycationic polypeptides, immunomodulating nucleic acids, especially deoxyinosine and/or deoxyuracile containing oligodeoxynucleotides, or mixtures thereof.

Preferably the vaccine further comprises a polycationic polymer, preferably a polycationic peptide, especially polyarginine, polylysine or an antimicrobial peptide.

The polycationic compound(s) to be used according to the present invention may be any polycationic compound, which shows the characteristic effect according to the WO 97/30721. Preferred polycationic compounds are selected from basic polypeptides, or organic polycations, basic polyaminoacids or mixtures thereof.

These polyaminoacids should have a chain length of at least 4 amino acid residues. Especially preferred are substances containing peptidic bounds, like polylysine, polyarginine and polypeptides containing more than 20%, especially more than 50% of basic amino acids in a range of more than 8, especially more than 20, amino acid residues or mixtures thereof. Other preferred polycations and their pharmaceutical compositions are described in WO 97/30721 (e.g. polyethyleneimine) and WO 99/38528. Preferably these polypeptides contain between 20 and 500 amino acid residues, especially between 30 and 200 residues.

These polycationic compounds may be produced chemically or recombinantly or may be derived from natural sources.

Cationic (poly)peptides may also be polycationic anti-bacterial microbial peptides. These (poly)peptides may be of prokaryotic or animal or plant origin or may be produced chemically or recombinantly. Peptides may also belong to the class of defensins. Such host defense peptides or defensins are also a preferred form of the polycationic polymer according to the present invention. Generally, a compound allowing as an end product activation (or down-regulation) of the adaptive immune system, preferably mediated by APCs (including dendritic cells) is used as polycationic polymer.

Especially preferred for use as polycationic substance in the present invention are cathelicidin derived antimicrobial peptides or derivatives thereof (WO 02/13857), incorporated herein by reference), especially antimicrobial peptides derived from mammal cathelicidin, preferably from human, bovine or mouse, or neuroactive compounds, such as (human) growth hormone (as described e.g. in WO01/24822).

Polycationic compounds derived from natural sources include HIV-REV or HIV-TAT (derived cationic peptides, antennapedia peptides, chitosan or other derivatives of chitin) or other peptides derived from these peptides or proteins by biochemical or recombinant production. Other preferred polycationic compounds are cathelin or related or derived substances from cathelin, especially mouse, bovine or especially human cathelins and/or

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cathelicidins. Related or derived cathelin substances contain the whole or parts of the cathelin sequence with at least 15-20 amino acid residues. Derivations may include the substitution or modification of the natural amino acids by amino acids, which are not among the 20 standard amino acids. Moreover, further cationic residues may be introduced into such cathelin molecules. These cathelin molecules are preferred to be combined with the antigen/vaccine composition according to the present invention. However, these cathelin molecules surprisingly have turned out to be also effective as an adjuvant for an antigen without the addition of further adjuvants. It is therefore possible to use such cathelin molecules as efficient adjuvants in vaccine formulations with or without further immunactivating substances.

Another preferred polycationic substance to be used according to the present invention is a synthetic peptide containing at least 2 KKK-motifs separated by a linker of 3 to 7 hydrophobic amino acids, especially L (WO 02/32451, incorporated herein by reference).

The immunomodulating (or:immunogenic) nucleic acids to be used according to the present invention can be of synthetic, prokaryotic and eukaryotic origin. In the case of eukaryotic origin, DNA should be derived from, based on the phylogenetic tree, less developed species (e.g. insects, but also others). In a preferred embodiment of the invention the immunogenic oligodeoxynucleotide (ODN) is a synthetically produced DNA-molecule or mixtures of such molecules. Derivatives or modifications of ODNs such as thiophosphate substituted analogues (thiophosphate residues substitute for phosphate) as for example described in US patents US 5,723,335 and US 5,663,153, and other derivatives and modifications, which preferably stabilize the immunostimulatory composition(s) but do not change their immunological properties, are also included. A preferred sequence motif is a six base DNA motif containing an (unmethylated) CpG dinucleotide flanked by two 5' purines and two 3' pyrimidines (5'-Pur-Pur-C-G-Pyr-Pyr-3'). The CpG motifs contained in the ODNs according to the present invention are more common in microbial than higher vertebrate DNA and display differences in the pattern of methyl-

ation. Surprisingly, sequences stimulating mouse APCs are not very efficient for human cells. Preferred palindromic or non-palindromic ODNs to be used according to the present invention are disclosed e.g. in Austrian Patent applications A 1973/2000, A 805/2001, EP 0 468 520 A2, WO 96/02555, WO 98/16247, WO 98/18810, WO 98/37919, WO 98/40100, WO 98/52581, WO 98/52962, WO 99/51259 and WO 99/56755 all incorporated herein by reference. Apart from stimulating the immune system certain ODNs are neutralizing some immune responses. These sequences are also included in the current invention, for example for applications for the treatment of autoimmune diseases. ODNs/DNAs may be produced chemically or recombinantly or may be derived from natural sources. Preferred natural sources are insects.

Alternatively, also nucleic acids based on inosine and cytidine (as e.g. described in the WO 01/93903) or deoxynucleic acids containing deoxy-inosine and/or deoxyuridine residues (described in WO 01/93905 and PCT/EP 02/05448; incorporated herein by reference) may preferably be used as immunostimulatory nucleic acids for the present invention.

Of course, also mixtures of different immunogenic nucleic acids may be used according to the present invention.

Preferably, the present vaccine further comprises a pharmaceutically acceptable carrier.

According to a further preferred embodiment, the present vaccine comprises an epitope or peptide which is provided in a form selected from peptides, peptide analogues, proteins, naked DNA, RNA, viral vectors, virus-like particles, recombinant/chimeric viruses, recombinant bacteria or dendritic cells pulsed with protein/peptide/RNA or transfected with DNA comprising the epitopes or peptides.

According to a further aspect, the present invention is drawn to T cells, a T cell clone or a population (preparation) of T cells specifically recognizing any HCV epitope or peptide according to the present invention, especially a HCV epitope as described above. A preferred application of such T cells is their expan-

sion in vitro and use for therapy of patients e.g. by adoptive transfer. Therefore, the present invention also provides the use of T cells, a T cell clone or a population (preparation) of T cells for the preparation of a composition for the therapy of HCV patients.

Such T cells (clones or lines) according to the present invention, specifically those recognizing the aforementioned HCV peptides are also useful for identification of heteroclitic epitopes, which are distinct from the originally identified epitopes but trigger the same T cells.

Such cells, compositions or vaccines according to the present invention are administered to the individuals in an effective amount.

According to a further aspect, the present invention also relates to the use of the peptides with formulae QRKTKRNTN, QRKTKRNT, or 1615, 1616, 1617 in particular 9meric peptides derived from the latter 3 peptides with formulae SAKSKFGYG, SAKSKYGYG, or SARKSYGYG as HLA-B\*08 epitopes, especially for the preparation of a pharmaceutical preparation for a HLA-B\*08 specific vaccine; the use of the peptides with the formulae RKTKRNTNTR as HLA-B\*2705 epitope, especially for the preparation of a pharmaceutical preparation for a HLA-B\*2705 specific vaccine; and the use of the peptides with the formulae ARLIVFPDL as HLA-B\*2705 and HLA-B\*2709 specific vaccine. Further, it also relates to the use of the hotspot epitopes selected from the group of peptides 1835, 84EX, 87EX, 89EX, 1426, 1650, 1836, 1846, 1651, 1800, 1799, C114, 1827, C112, C114EX, 1827EX, 1798, 1604, 1829, 1579, 1624, 1848, 1547, A1A7, A122EX, A122, 1825, A241, B8B38, C70EX, C92, C97, C106, and C134 according to table 7 for the preparation of a vaccine comprising synthetic peptides, recombinant protein and/or DNA constitutes of such epitopes.

In particular, two or more epitope hotspots can be combined, with or without linker sequences. Preferred linker sequences consist for instance of 3 to 5 glycine, or alanine or lysine residues. This may be achieved by peptide synthesis. However, combination of hotspots may result in quite long polypeptides.

In this case, cloning DNA encoding for such constructs and expressing and purifying the corresponding recombinant protein is an alternative. Such recombinant proteins can be used as antigens, which in combination with the right adjuvant (IC31, pR,...) can elicit T-cell responses against all the epitopes they harbor. At the same time, such artificial polypeptides are devoid of the activities (enzymatic, toxic, immuno-suppressive, ...), the natural HCV antigens may possess.

There are several other ways of delivering T-cell epitope hotspots or combinations thereof. These include: recombinant viral vectors like vaccinia virus, canary pox virus, adenovirus; self-replicating RNA vectors; "naked DNA" vaccination with plasmids encoding the hotspots or combination thereof; recombinant bacteria (e.g. Salmonella); dendritic cells pulsed with synthetic peptides, or recombinant protein, or RNA or transfected with DNA, each encoding T-cell epitope hotspots or combinations thereof.

The invention will be explained in more detail by way of the following examples and drawing figures, to which, however it is not limited.

Fig.1 shows 40 peptide mixtures each containing up to 20 HCV derived 15- to 23mer peptides.

Fig.2 shows the Epitope Capture approach using peptide pools and empty DRB1\*0401 molecules.

Fig.3 shows the Epitope Capture approach using peptide pools and empty DRB1\*0404 molecules.

Fig.4 shows binding of individual peptides to DRB1\*0401.

Fig.5 shows binding of individual peptides to DRB1\*0404.

Fig.6 shows binding of individual peptides to DRB1\*0101.

Fig.7 shows peptides binding to DRB1\*0701.

Fig.8 shows mouse IFN-gamma ELISpot with splenocytes or separated CD8+ or CD4+ cells from HLA-DRB1\*0401 tg mice vaccinated with Ipepl604+IC31.

Fig.9 shows mouse IFN-gamma ELISpot with splenocytes or separated CD8+ or CD4+ cells from HLA-A\*0201 tg mice vaccinated with Ipepl604+IC31.

Fig.10 shows mouse IFN-gamma ELISpot with splenocytes or separated CD8+ or CD4+ cells from HLA-B\*0702tg mice vaccinated with Ipepl604+IC31.

#### Examples :

##### General description of the examples:

The present examples show the performance of the present invention on a specific pathogen hepatitis C virus (HCV).

In the first part the method according to the present invention was applied, which is based on the use of "empty HLA molecules". These molecules were incubated with mixtures of potential HCV derived peptide ligands, screening for specific binding events. The possibility to use highly complex mixtures allows a very quick identification of the few binders out of hundreds or even thousands of potential ligands. This is demonstrated by using HLA-DRB1\*0101, -DRB1\*0401, -DRB1\*0404, -DRB1\*0701 molecules and pools of overlapping 15- to 23mers. Importantly, this analysis using multiple different HLA-alleles allows identifying promiscuous ligands capable to binding to more than one HLA allele. Promiscuous T-cell epitopes are particularly valuable components of epitope-based vaccines. They enable treating a higher portion of a population than epitopes restricted to one HLA allele.

The same process can be applied for class I molecules and peptides of appropriate length i.e. 8 to 11-mers. The ligand-pools can be synthetic overlapping peptides. Another possibility is to digest the antigen in question enzymatically or non-enzymatically. The latter achieved by alkali-hydrolysis generates all po-

tential degradation products and has been successfully used to identify T cell epitopes (Gavin 1993). Enzymatic digestions can be done with proteases. One rational way would further be to use proteases involved in the natural antigen-processing pathway like the proteasome for class I restricted epitopes (Heemels 1995) or cathepsins for class II restricted epitopes (Villadangos 2000). Ligand pools could also be composed of naturally occurring ligands obtained for instance by lysis of or elution from cells carrying the respective epitope. In this regard it is important to note that also non-peptide ligands like for instance glycolipids can be applied. It is known that non-classical class I molecules, which can be encoded by the MHC (e.g. HLA-G, HLA-E, MICA, MICB) or outside the MHC (e.g. CD1 family) can present various non-peptide ligands to lymphocytes (Kronenberg 1999). Use of recombinant "empty" nonclassical class I molecules would allow binding reactions and identification of binders in similar manner as described here.

After rapid identification of ligands capable of binding to HLA molecules the process according to the present invention also offers ways to characterize directly specific T cell responses against these binders. One possibility is to directly use the isolated HLA:ligand complex in a so called "synthetic T cell assay". The latter involves antigen-specific re-stimulation of T cells by the HLA:ligand complex together with a second signal providing co-stimulation like activation of CD28 by an activating antibody. This assay can be done in an ELISpot readout.

Another possibility is the immunization of HLA-transgenic mice to prove immunogenicity of ligands identified by the Epitope Capture approach as demonstrated in Example II.

## MATERIALS & METHODS

### Peptides

In order to identify conserved regions between HCV genotypes 1, 2 and 3, about 90 full genomes publicly available through Genbank were aligned. In total, 43% of the coding region of HCV was found to be conserved in at least 80% of clinical isolates. In



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cases, where at a certain position consistently two distinct amino acids (eg. arginine or lysine) were found, both variants were considered for analysis. Altogether 148 conserved regions, longer than 8 amino acids were identified. Conserved region were spanned by ~500 fifteen amino acid residue (15mer) peptides, each peptide overlapping its precursor by 14 out of 15 amino acids. Conserved regions between 8 and 14 amino acids long were covered by further 80 (non-overlapping) 15mers. 15mers were synthesized using standard F-moc chemistry in parallel (288 at a time) on a Syro II synthesizer (MultisynTech, Witten, Germany). Each fourth 15mer was checked by mass spectrometry. 15mers were applied for experiments without further purification. In addition 63 peptides of 16-xx aa were synthesized using standard F-moc chemistry on an ABI 433A synthesizer (Applied Biosystems, Weiterstadt, Germany) and purified by RP-HPLC (Biocut 700E, Applied Biosystems, Langen, Germany) using a C18 column (either ODS ACU from YMC or 218TP, Vydac). Purity and identity were characterized by MALDI-TOF on a Reflex III mass-spectrometer (Bruker, Bremen, Germany). Peptides were solubilized in 100 % DMSO at ~10 mg/ml (~5 mM). Stocks of peptide pools (20 peptides each) were made in 100 % DMSO at a final concentration of 0.5 mg/ml (~0.25 mM) for each peptide. All peptides used in the present invention are listed in Table 1. Peptides YAR (YARFQSQTTLKQKT), HA (PKYVKQNTLKLAT), P1 (GYKVLVLNPSVAAT), P2 (HMWNFISGIYLAGLSTLPGNPA), P3 (KFFGGGQIVGVYLLFRRRGPRPL), P4 (DLMGYIPAV) and CLIP (KLPKPPKPVSKMRMATPLLMQALPM) were used as control peptides in binding assays.

#### Epitope capture and peptide binding assay

Soluble HLA class II DRA1\*0101/DRB1\*0101/Ii, DRA1\*0101/DRB1\*0401/Ii, DRA1\*0101/DRB1\*0404/Ii and DRA1\*0101/DRB1\*0701/Ii molecules were expressed in SC-2 cells and purified as described in Aichinger et al., 1997. In peptide binding reactions soluble DRB1\*0101, DRB1\*0401, DRB1\*0404 molecules were used in a concentration of ~0.5  $\mu$ M, and each single peptide was added in 10-fold molar excess (5  $\mu$ M) if not mentioned differently. The concentration of DMSO in the binding reaction did not exceed 4 %. The reaction was performed in PBS buffer (pH 7.4) at room temperature for 48 hours in the presence

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of a protease inhibitor cocktail (Roche) and 0.1 % octyl-beta-D-glucopyranoside (Sigma). Peptide binding was evaluated in an SDS-stability assay (Gorga et al., 1987): trimeric HLA class II alpha:beta:peptide complexes are resistant to SDS and consequently appear as ~60 kDa band in SDS-PAGE Western blot analysis. Individual HLA class II alpha- and beta-chains not stabilized by bound peptide migrate as ~35 kDa and ~25 kDa bands, respectively. Briefly, HLA-peptide complexes were treated with 1 % SDS at room temperature and resolved by SDS-PAGE run with 20 mA for approximately 2.5 hours at room temperature. Protein was transferred onto PVDF membrane by electroblotting, and stained with anti-alpha-chain TAL.1B5 or/and beta-chain MEM136 antibodies. For detection of Western-blot signals ECL solutions (Amersham) were used. For DRB1\*0101 molecules HA and P1 peptides were used as controls for evaluation of strong binding, P2 peptide for intermediate binding and YAR as a negative control. For DRB1\*0401 the strongest binding controls were YAR and HA peptides, while P1 and P2 served as an intermediate and weak binder, respectively. In the case of DRB1\*0404 molecules P1 and P2 peptides were used to estimate strong binding, YAR peptide to control intermediate binding and HA peptide as an negative control. The binding affinities to DRB1\*0701 were test by a peptide-competition assay (Reay et al., 1992). Briefly, binding of the biotinylated CLIP peptide with high affinity (reference peptide) has been used for monitoring of HLA:peptide complex formation. A testing peptide added to the binding reaction at an equimolar concentration to CLIP peptide could compete out CLIP when its affinity is higher or inhibit binding for 50 % if its affinity is equal to affinity of CLIP. In the case of lower affinity peptides they should be added in excess to the reference peptide to compete for occupancy of HLA binding groove. The values of the concentration of competitor peptides required for 50 % inhibition of reference peptide (biotinylated CLIP) binding ( $IC_{50}$ ) can be used for evaluation of peptide binding affinities. Alternatively, comparing of the amount of reference peptide bound to HLA molecules in the presence or absence of competitor peptide one can determine the binding activity of the peptide of interest. In the present peptide-competition assay conditions of peptide binding were similar to described above. DRB1\*0701 molecules were used in a concentration of ~0.5  $\mu$ M and biotinylated

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CLIP was added to all samples in the final concentration of 2  $\mu$ M. Competitor peptides were added in three different concentrations: 2 nM, 20  $\mu$ M and 200  $\mu$ M. Binding reaction was performed in PBS buffer (pH 7.4) for 18 hours at 37°C. The amount of biotinylated CLIP associated with soluble DRB1\*0701 molecules was determined by ELISA. Briefly, MaxiSorp 96-well plates (Nunc, Denmark) were coated with mouse anti-DR antibody L243 by overnight incubation with 50  $\mu$ l of 10  $\mu$ g/ml dilution in PBS at 4°C. Non-specific binding to wells was blocked by incubation with T-PBS containing 3 % of BSA for 2 hours at 37°C and binding reactions were then "captured" for 2 hours at room temperature. Following extensive washing, HLA-associated peptide complexes were detected using alkaline phosphatase-streptavidin (Dako) and Sigma 104 phosphatase substrate. A microplate reader (VICTOR) was used to monitor optical density at 405 nm. Non-biotinylated CLIP, P1 and P2 peptides were used as positive controls to evaluate strong binding. Peptide P3 and P4 served as a weakly binding and non-binding control, respectively.

#### Immunization of HLA-transgenic mice

Immunogenicity of synthetic HCV-derived peptides was tested in HLA-DRB1\*0401- and HLA-A\*0201-transgenic mice as follows: Groups of 3 mice (female, 8 weeks of age) were injected subcutaneously into the flank (in total 100 $\mu$ g of peptide + 30 $\mu$ g oligodinucleotide CpI (Purimex, Göttingen, Germany) per mouse). One week after the vaccination, spleens were removed and the splenocytes were activated ex vivo with the peptide used for vaccination and an irrelevant negative control peptide to determine IFN-gamma-producing specific cells (mouse ELISpot assay).

Mouse splenocyte ELISpot assay for single cell IFN-gamma release ELISpot plates (MAHA S4510, Millipore, Germany) were rinsed with PBS (200  $\mu$ l/well), coated with anti-mouse IFN-gamma mAb (clone R46A2; 100  $\mu$ l/well of 5  $\mu$ g/ml in 0.1 M NaHCO<sub>3</sub>, pH 9.2-9.5) and incubated overnight at 4°C. Plates were washed four times with PBS/0.1% Tween 20 and incubated with PBS/1% BSA (200  $\mu$ l/well) at room temperature for 2 h to block nonspecific binding. Spleen cells from vaccinated mice were prepared and plated at  $1 \times 10^6$  -  $3 \times 10^5$  cells/well and incubated overnight at 37°C/5% CO<sub>2</sub> either

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in the presence of the immunizing antigen (peptide), control peptides or with medium alone. Subsequently, plates were washed four times and incubated with biotinylated anti-mouse IFN- $\gamma$  mAb (clone AN18.17.24, 100  $\mu$ l/well of 2  $\mu$ g/ml in PBS/1% BSA) for 2 h at 37°C. After washing, streptavidin-peroxidase (Roche Diagnostics, Vienna, Austria) was added (1/5000 in PBS, 100  $\mu$ l/well) and plates were incubated at room temperature for 2 additional hours. Subsequently, substrate was added to the washed plates (100  $\mu$ l/well of a mixture of 10 ml 100 mM Tris pH 7.5 supplemented with 200  $\mu$ l of 40 mg/ml DAB stock containing 50  $\mu$ l of 80 mg/ml NiCl<sub>2</sub> stock and 5  $\mu$ l of 30% H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>). The reaction was stopped after 20-30 minutes by washing the plates with tap water. Dried plates were evaluated with an ELISpot reader (BIOREADER 2000, BioSys, Karben, Germany).

#### **IFN- $\gamma$ ELISpot with human PBMC**

PBMC from HCV RNA-negative therapy responders or subjects spontaneously recovered were collected and HLA-typed serologically. Whole blood was collected in ACD Vacutainer tubes (Becton Dickinson Europe, Erembodegem, Germany). PBMC were isolated on Lymphoprep (Nycomed Pharma AS, Oslo, Norway) using Leuco-sep tubes (Greiner, Frickenhausen, Germany), washed 3x with PBS (Invitrogen Life Technologies (formerly GIBCOBRL), Carlsbad, CA, USA) and resuspended at a concentration of  $2 \times 10^7$ /ml in freezing medium consisting of 4 parts RPMI 1640 supplemented with 1 mM sodium pyruvate, 2 mM L-glutamine, 0.1 mM non-essential amino acids, 50  $\mu$ M 2-mercaptoethanol (all from Invitrogen Life Technologies), 9 parts foetal bovine serum (FCS; from PAA, Linz, Austria) and 1 part DMSO (SIGMA, Deisenhofen, Germany). PBMC were stored over night in 1°C freezing containers (Nalgene Nunc International, Rochester, New York, USA) at -80°C and then transferred into liquid nitrogen. The ELISpot assay was essentially done as described (Lalvani et al.). Briefly, Multi Screen 96-well filtration plates MAIP S4510 (Millipore, Bedford, MA) were coated with 10  $\mu$ g/ml (0.75  $\mu$ g/well) anti-human IFN- $\gamma$  monoclonal antibody (Mab) B140 (Bender Med Systems, Vienna, Austria) over night at 4°C. Plates were washed 2 times with PBS (Invitrogen Life Technologies) and blocked with ELISpot medium (RPMI 1640 supplemented with 1 mM sodium pyruvate, 2 mM L-glutamine, 0.1 mM non-essential amino acids, 50  $\mu$ M 2-mercaptoethanol (all from In-

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vitrogen Life Technologies) and 10% human serum type AB (PAA, Linz, Austria). Cryo-preserved PBMC were thawed quickly in a 37°C water bath, washed 1x with ELISPOT medium and incubated overnight (37°C, 5% CO<sub>2</sub>). The next day cells were plated at 200,000 PBMC/well and co-cultivated with either individual peptides (10 µg/ml) or peptide pools (each peptide at a final concentration of 5 µg/ml) for 20 hrs. After removing cells and washing 6 times with wash buffer (PBS; 0.1% Tween 20 from SIGMA), 100 µl of a 1:10000 dilution (0.015 µg/well) of the biotinylated anti-human IFN-γ MAb B308-BT2 (Bender Med Systems), was added for an incubation of 2 hrs at 37°C or alternatively for over night at 4°C. After washing, Streptavidin-alkaline phosphatase (DAKO, Glostrup, Denmark) was added at 1.2 µg/ml for 1 hr at 37°C. The assay was developed by addition of 100 µl/well BCIP/NBT alkaline phosphatase substrate (SIGMA).

#### **In vitro priming of human PBMCs**

Human PBMCs are repeatedly stimulated with antigen (peptide or peptide mixture) in the presence of IL-2 and IL-7. This leads to the selective oligoclonal expansion of antigen-specific T cells. Responses against individual epitopes can be assessed for instance by IFN-γ ELISPOT assays. Freshly thawed PBMCs were cultured in 6 well plates (2-4x 10<sup>6</sup>/mL viable cells) in RPMI-1640 (GibcoBRL), 1% non-essential amino acids (GibcoBRL, cat# 11140-035), 1% Penicillin (10,000 U/ml)-Streptomycin (10,000 µg/ml) (GibcoBRL, cat#15140-122), 1% L-Glutamine (GibcoBRL), 0.1% beta-mercapto-ethanol (GibcoBRL), 1% Na-pyruvate (GibcoBRL), plus 10% Human AB serum (PAA, Linz, Austria). Peptides (10µM each) were added to each well. rhIL-7 (Strathmann Biotech) was added at 10 ng/mL final concentration. 20-30 U/mL rhIL-2 (Strathmann Biotech) were added on day 4. On day 10, all cells were removed from plates, washed once in media (as above), and counted. For the next cycle of in vitro priming, viable cells were co-cultivated with autologous gamma irradiated (1.2 gray/min, for 20 minutes) PBMC as feeders (plated at 100,000 per well) and peptides, rh-IL-2 as described above. ELISPOT was done as described above, except that 200,000 responder cells (pre-stimulated for 2 rounds of in vitro priming) were used together with 60,000 autologous irradiated responder cells.

**Example I. Rapid identification of promiscuous HLA-binding peptides from HCV by measuring peptide pools arrayed in matrix format**

To span conserved regions within the HCV polyprotein more than 640 peptides were synthesized (Table 1). For rapid identification of HLA ligands and novel T-cell epitopes, 40 peptide pools each containing 20 single peptides were prepared. The pools were constructed in a way that each peptide was present in 2 pools (matrix format). This allows identification of reactive peptides at the crossover points of row- and column mixtures (Fig. 1 HCV peptide matrix).

Table 1. Synthetic peptides derived from conserved regions of HCV.

Peptide ID	Peptide ID	Peptide ID	Peptide ID
A 1	A 79	A 157	A 1123
A 2	A 80	A 158	A 1124
A 3	A 81	A 159	A 1125
A 4	A 82	A 160	A 1126
A 5	A 83	A 161	A 1127
A 6	A 84	A 162	A 1128
A 7	A 85	A 163	A 1129
A 8	A 86	A 164	A 1130
A 9	A 87	A 165	A 1131
A 10	A 88	A 166	A 1132
A 11	A 89	A 167	A 1133
A 12	A 90	A 168	A 1134
A 13	A 91	A 169	A 1135
A 14	A 92	A 170	A 1136
A 15	A 93	A 171	A 1137
A 16	A 94	A 172	A 1138
A 17	A 95	A 173	A 1139
A 18	A 96	A 174	A 1140
A 19	A 97	A 175	A 1141
A 20	A 98	A 176	A 1142
A 21	A 99	A 177	A 1143
A 22	A 100	A 178	A 1144
A 23	A 101	A 179	A 1145
A 24	A 102	A 180	A 1146
A 25	A 103	A 181	A 1147
A 26	A 104	A 182	A 1148
A 27	A 105	A 183	A 1149
A 28	A 106	A 184	A 1150
A 29	A 107	A 185	A 1151
A 30	A 108	A 186	A 1152
A 31	A 109	A 187	A 1153
A 32	A 110	A 188	A 1154
A 33	A 111	A 189	A 1155
A 34	A 112	A 190	A 1156
A 35	A 113	A 191	A 1157
A 36	A 114	A 192	A 1158
A 37	A 115	A 193	A 1159
A 38	A 116	A 194	A 1160
A 39	A 117	A 195	A 1161
A 40	A 118	A 196	A 1162
A 41	A 119	A 197	A 1163
A 42	A 120	A 198	A 1164
A 43	A 121	A 199	A 1165
A 44	A 122	A 200	A 1166
A 45	A 123	A 201	A 1167
A 46	A 124	A 202	A 1168
A 47	A 125	A 203	A 1169
A 48	A 126	A 204	A 1170
A 49	A 127	A 205	A 1171
A 50	A 128	A 206	A 1172
A 51	A 129	A 207	A 1173
A 52	A 130	A 208	A 1174
A 53	A 131	A 209	A 1175
A 54	A 132	A 210	A 1176
A 55	A 133	A 211	A 1177
A 56	A 134	A 212	A 1178
A 57	A 135	A 213	A 1179
A 58	A 136	A 214	A 1180
A 59	A 137	A 215	A 1181
A 60	A 138	A 216	A 1182
A 61	A 139	A 217	A 1183
A 62	A 140	A 218	A 1184
A 63	A 141	A 219	A 1185
A 64	A 142	A 220	A 1186
A 65	A 143	A 221	A 1187
A 66	A 144	A 222	A 1188
A 67	A 145	A 223	A 1189
A 68	A 146	A 224	A 1190
A 69	A 147	A 225	A 1191
A 70	A 148	A 226	A 1192
A 71	A 149	A 227	A 1193
A 72	A 150	A 228	A 1194
A 73	A 151	A 229	A 1195
A 74	A 152	A 230	A 1196
A 75	A 153	A 231	A 1197
A 76	A 154	A 232	A 1198
A 77	A 155	A 233	A 1199
A 78	A 156	A 234	A 1200





Peptide ID (seq)	
1555	MSNTPKQKTKGNTNRPPQDKVFGSGGQGVGVLLPRRPGRLVRLTRKTSERSQPRGRQPIPK
1556	VLNLPALSPGALVYVYVQALRLRVYVFGEGVQVMNRLVAFSRGNHVSPTHYV
1557	KGGRULFCHSKKQCDLA
1558	TVPDVRSRQRRGRGR
1559	VLVAYQATVCARAGAPPSWD
1560	HLHPTSGSKSTQVPAAYAAGQYKVLNPSVAATLFGAY
1561	VLHPTSGSKSTQVPAAYAAGQYKVLNPSVAATLFGAY
1562	GAAVSGIGLQKVLVDLAGYGAAGALVAFKMSGE
1563	GAAVSGIGLQKVLVDLAGYGAAGALVAFKMSGE
1564	GAAVSGIGLQKVLVDLAGYGAAGALVAFKMSGE
1565	GAAVSGIGLQKVLVDLAGYGAAGALVAFKMSGE
1566	TEAMTRYSPAGDPP
1567	SGMPLEGGSGDPL
1568	CGVRRCAASGLTTS
1569	PVNSWLGNIQYAPT
1570	PVNSWLGNIQYAPT
1571	SGMPDSVLCECYDAGAWYELTPAETTVRLRAY
1572	SGMPDSVLCECYDAGAWYELTPAETTVRLRAY
1573	SGMPDSVLCECYDAGAWYELTPAETTVRLRAY
1574	SGMPDSVLCECYDAGAWYELTPAETTVRLRAY
1575	FWAKGMWVFISGIVLAGLSTLPGNPAISLMAF
1576	QEVQVSTATQSLAT
1577	QEVQVSTATQSLAT
1578	FTDNSTPPAVPQTGV
1579	FTDNSTPPAVPQTGV
1580	NAVAYYRGLDVSVPT
1581	MLLPOLSPGALVGVNCAALRVYVFGEGVQVMNRLVAFSRGNHVSPTHYV
1582	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1583	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1584	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1585	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1586	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1587	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1588	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1589	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1590	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1591	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1592	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1593	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1594	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1595	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1596	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1597	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1598	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1599	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1600	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1601	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1602	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1603	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1604	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1605	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1606	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1607	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1608	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1609	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1610	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1611	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1612	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1613	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1614	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1615	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1616	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1617	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1618	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1619	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1620	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1621	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1622	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1623	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1624	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1625	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1626	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1627	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1628	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1629	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1630	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1631	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1632	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1633	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1634	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1635	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1636	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1637	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1638	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1639	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1640	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1641	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1642	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1643	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1644	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1645	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1646	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1647	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1648	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1649	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1650	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1651	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1652	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1653	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1654	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1655	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT
1656	ITLIGLTVLDQAETAGRLVLTATPPQSVT

For epitope capture, each peptide pool was incubated with soluble recombinant HLA-class II molecules and specific binding was assessed by an SDS-stability assay. The results using the HLA molecules DRB1\*0401, DRB1\*0404 and DRB1\*0101 are shown in Fig. 2 and 3 respectively: 28 peptide pools were found which bind to DRB1\*0401 molecules: no. 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20 from "row" pools and no. 23, 25, 26, 27, 29, 30, 31, 34, 36, 38, 39 and 40 from "column" pools (Fig. 2). 35 peptide pools out of 40 tested were positive in binding to DRB1\*0404 molecules (Fig. 3), while all peptide pools showed binding activity to DRB1\*0101 molecules. By finding the intersections of reactive pools in the array, potential individual binders were determined and re-checked for binding affinity individually.

All individually confirmed peptides are summarized in Table 2. Binding to DRB1\*0401 is shown in Fig. 4: 54 individual peptides were identified as ligands of this HLA-type. Often several overlapping 15mers in a row bound to HLA allowing identification of their core binding regions. Peptide differing only by one or two amino acids representing variants (see Table 1) usually bound both to soluble HLA class II molecules. Such "duplicates" were considered to represent the same epitope. Thus, 31 ligands capable to bind to DRB1\*0401 were identified, including 11 previously known class II epitopes. From the latter, however, only two (A202-A206 and B60-B68) had been known to be restricted to DR4 (see Table 2). 20 ligands are candidates for novel epitopes. For DRB1\*0404, 64 binders designated as 28 potential epitopes were determined, 4 of them belong to already known epitopes (Fig. 5, Table 2). For DRB1\*0101, 83 peptides representing 44 potential epitopes were identified (Fig. 6, Table 2). Of those, 7 had been described previously but with different HLA restriction.

All individually confirmed peptides binding to at least one of the 3 above mentioned HLA types were also tested for affinity to DRB1\*0701 molecules in a peptide-competition assay (Fig. 7, Table 2). Here, 50 ligands were identified. Of those, 7 correspond to already known class II epitopes, but only one was described as DRB1\*0701 epitope (A202-A206).

**Table 2. HCV derived peptides binding to soluble HLA class II molecules.** About 400 15- to 23-mer peptides derived from conserved regions of HCV were analyzed by the Epitope Capture Method using pools of up to 20 peptides arrayed in matrix format (see Fig. 1) and four different HLA class II molecules. Specific binding was confirmed for individual peptides.

ID	Peptide sequence	Binding to DRB1				Known / new potential epitope, HLA coverage
		*0101	*0401	*0404	*0701	
A120	NTNGSWHINRTALNC				nb	
A122	NGSWHINRTALNCND					new DRB1*0101, *0401, *0404, *0701: 45-55%
A124	SWHINRTALNCNDSL					
B25	DAGCAWYELTPAETS	***	***	***		
B26	AGCAWYELTPAETSV	***	***	***	nb	
B28	CAWYELTPAETSVRL	***	***	***		new DRB1*0101, *0401, *0404, *0701: 45-55%
B30	WYELTPAETSVRLRA	***	***	***	nb	
B46	AGAAYWYELTPAETTV	***	***	***	nb	
B48	AAWYELTPAETTVRL	***	***	***	nb	new DRB1*0101, *0401, *0404, *0701: 45-55%
B84	GGIGLGVLDILAG					
B86	IGLGVLDILAGYG					
B88	IGLGVLDILAGYAG					new DRB1*0101, *0401, *0404, *0701: 45-55%
B92	YDILAGYAGYAGA					
C106	TRVPYFVRAGQLIRA			nb		
C113	TAYSQOTRGLGCI	***				new DRB1*0101, *0401, *0404, *0701: 45-55%
C114	TAYSQOTRGLGCI	***				new DRB1*0101, *0401, *0404, *0701: 45-55%
1627	PEYDELITSCSNVSA	***	***	***	nb	new DRB1*0101, *0401, *0404, *0701: 45-55%
1628	VGCPVYCFITSPVVGTTDR	***	***	***	nb	new DRB1*0101, *0401, *0404, *0701: 45-55%
1629	GWAGWLLSPRGSRPSWGP	***	***	***	nb	new DRB1*0101, *0401, *0404, *0701: 45-55%
1604	VVCCSMYITWTGALTICP	***	***	***	nb	new DRB1*0101, *0401, *0404, *0701: 45-55%
1630	LFLLLADARVCACLWM	***	***	nb	***	new DRB1*0101, *0401, *0701: 40-50%
C97	GVLFGLAYFSMVGNW	***	***	nb	***	new DRB1*0101, *0401, *0701: 40-50%
1547	YLVAQATVCARAGAPPSWD	***	***	nb	***	new DRB1*0101, *0401, *0701: 40-50%
B94	DILAGYGAGVAGALV	nb	nb	nb	nb	
B95	ILAGYGAGVAGALV	nb	nb	nb	nb	
B96	LAGYGAGVAGALVAF	nb	nb	nb	nb	new DRB1*0101, *0401, *0701: 40-50%
B97	AGYGAGVAGALVAFK	nb	nb	nb	nb	
B98	GYGAGVAGALVAFKI	nb	nb	nb	nb	
A272	ETAGVRLTVLATATP			nb		
A274	AGVRLTVLATATPPG		nb	nb	nb	new DRB1*0101, *0401, *0701: 40-50%
A276	VRLTVLATATPPGSV		nb	nb		
B120	AGISGALVAFKIMSG	nb	nb	***	***	new DRB1*0101, *0404, *0701: ~45%
B122	VNLLPAILSPGALV	nb	nb	***	***	new DRB1*0101, *0404, *0701: ~45%
C108	HAGRLDAVAEPV	nb	nb	***	***	new DRB1*0101, *0404, *0701: ~45%
C134	ITLLFNILGGWVAQ	nb	nb	***	***	new DRB1*0101, *0404, *0701: ~45%
C152	VMGSSYGFQYSPQQR	nb	nb	***	***	new DRB1*0101, *0404, *0701: ~45%
1606	VLTSMLTDPSHITAETA	nb	***	***	***	new DRB1*0401, *0404, *0701: ~45%
1607	VLTSMLTDPSHITAEAA	nb	***	***	***	new DRB1*0401, *0404, *0701: ~45%
1577	GEVQVSTATQSFAT	nb	***	***	***	new DRB1*0401, *0404, *0701: ~45%
1578	GEVQVSTVTQSFLLGT	nb	***	***	***	new DRB1*0401, *0404, *0701: ~45%
B50	AGAAYWYELTPAETSV	***	***	***		new DRB1*0101, *0401, *0404: ~40%
B52	AAWYELTPAETSVRL	***	***	***	nb	
1623	YLVAQATVCARAGAPPSWD	***	***	***		new DRB1*0101, *0401, *0404: ~40%
C130	QTVDFSLDPTFTIET	***	***	***	nb	new DRB1*0101, *0401, *0404: ~40%
1603	VFTGLTHIDAHFLSQTKQ	***	nb	nb	***	new DRB1*0101, *0701: ~40%
C96	GVLAGLAYYSVMVGNW	***	nb	nb	***	new DRB1*0101, *0701: ~40%

C191	YYLTRDPTTLARAA	nb	***	nb	*	new DRB1*0401, *0701:	-40%
A216	SGKSTKVPVAYAAQG	nb	*	nb	nb		
A218	KSTKVPVAYAAQGYK	nb	*	nb	nb		
A220	TKVPVAYAAQGYKVL	*	**	nb	nb	new DRB1*0101, *0401:	-35%
A222	VPVAYAAQGYKVLVL	*	nb	nb	nb		
A224	VAYAAQGYKVLVLNP	*	nb	nb	nb		
A242	TILGIGTVLDQAETA	nb	nb	*	*		
A244	LIGIGTVLDQAETAGA	*	*	nb	nb	new DRB1*0101, *0401:	-35%
C92	AFCSAMTVGDLGSGV	*	**	nb	nb	new DRB1*0101, *0401:	-35%
C93	AFCSALVVDLGGSV	*	*	nb	nb		
A174	PALSTGLLHLHQNV	nb	*	*	*	new DRB1*0404, *0701:	25-30%
B32	SGMFDSSVVLCECYDA	*	nb	***	*		
B34	MFDSVVLCECYDAGA	*	nb	***	nb	new DRB1*0101, *0404:	20-25%
B36	DSVVLCECYDAGAAW	*	nb	***	*		
B38	VVLCECYDAGAAWYE	nb	nb	*	nb		
B100	GAGVAGALVAFKIMS	**	nb	***	*	new DRB1*0101, *0404:	20-25%
B102	SVAGALVAFKIMSQE	**	nb	***	*		
C135	ITLLNLLGGWLAAG	**	nb	*	*	new DRB1*0101, *0404:	20-25%
C162	AVRTKLKLTPLPAAS	nb	*	*	nb	new DRB1*0401, *0404:	20-25%
1618	PMGFSYDTRCDFSTVTE	nb	nb	*	**	new DRB1*0701:	-25%
1622	NTPGLPVCQDHLFEWE	nb	nb	*	***	new DRB1*0701:	-25%
1624	EDRDRSELSPLLSTTEW	nb	nb	*	*	new DRB1*0701:	-25%
1646	TVPDVAVSRSORRGRTGRGR	nb	nb	nb	*	new DRB1*0701:	-25%
1656	TEAMTRYSAAPPDOPP	nb	nb	nb	*	new DRB1*0701:	-25%
A114	LPGCSFSIFLLALLS	**	nb	nb	nb	new DRB1*0101:	-20%
B58	MWNFISGIGYLAGLS	*	nb	nb	nb	new DRB1*0101:	-20%
B112	VDILAGYGAGISGAL	*	nb	nb	*		
B114	ILAGYGAGISGALVA	***	nb	nb	*	new DRB1*0101:	-20%
B116	AGYGAGISGALVAFK	***	nb	nb	nb		
B118	YGAGISGALVAFKIM	***	nb	nb	nb		
B18	DAGCAWYELTPAETT	***	nb	nb	nb		
B20	GCAWYELTPAETTVR	***	nb	nb	*	new DRB1*0101:	-20%
B22	AWYELTPAETTVRLR	***	nb	nb	nb		
C112	GGGWRLLPITAYSQ	**	nb	nb	*	new DRB1*0101:	-20%
C116	SCIVSMTGRGKTQV	*	nb	nb	*	new DRB1*0101:	-20%
C122	SYLKSSSGGQLLPCS	*	nb	nb	*	new DRB1*0101:	-20%
C127	TGEIPFYGAIRPV	*	nb	nb	*	new DRB1*0101:	-20%
C144	FTTWLDGQIIRVAP	**	nb	nb	*	new DRB1*0101:	-20%
C159	DLPOIQRLLHGLSAF	*	nb	nb	nb	new DRB1*0101:	-20%
C160	DLPOIQRLLHGLSAF	*	nb	nb	nb	new DRB1*0101:	-20%
C174	GLPYSALRGREILG	*	nb	nb	*	new DRB1*0101:	-20%
1558	CGVRRCRASGLVLTTS	***	nb	nb	nb	new DRB1*0101:	-20%
1581	NAVAYYRGLDVSVIFT	**	nb	nb	nb	new DRB1*0101:	-20%
C95	EFVQDCNCSYIPGHV	nb	**	nb	nb	new DRB1*0401:	-20%
C129	PTSGDVVVVATDALM	nb	nb	**	*	new DRB1*0404:	-5%
C157	LWARMILMTHFFSIL	nb	nb	*	nb	new DRB1*0404:	-5%
C158	LWYRMVLMTHFFSIL	nb	nb	*	*		
A254	ETAGARLVVLATATP	nb	nb	*	*		
A256	AGARLVVLATATPPG	nb	nb	*	*	new DRB1*0404:	-5%
A258	ARLVVLATATPPGSV	nb	nb	**	*		
1605	MYCCSMYSWYTGALITPC	nb	nb	*	nb	new DRB1*0404:	-5%
C109	AAGLRDLAVAVEPV	nb	*	*	*	new DRB1*0404:	-5%
C161	AVRTKLKLTPLPAAS	nb	*	*	*	new DRB1*0404:	-5%
A60	LKGVDTLTGFA	**	nb	nb	**	known DR4, DR8, DR15	

A61	IGKVDLTTCGFAD	**				new DR*0101, 0701
A70	TCGFADLMGYPLVG	***	nb	nb		
A72	GFADLMGYPLVGAP	***		***	**	known class II
A74	ADLMGYPLVGAPLG	***				DR*0101, 0404, 0701
A88	CGFADLMGYIPVVGGA	***		***		
A90	FADLMGYIPVVGAPL	***		***		known class II
A92	DLMGYIPVVGAPLGG	***		***	***	DR*0101, 0404, 0701
A96	LAHGVRLVEDGVNYA	nb	***	nb		
A98	HGVRVLEDGVNYATG	nb	***	***	**	known DR11
A100	MRVLEDGVNYATGNL	nb	***	***		new DR*0401, 0404, 0701
A102	VLEDGVNYATGNLPG	nb	*	*		
A104	EDGVNYATGNLPGCS	nb	*	nb	nb	
A200	AAQGYKVLVLPNSVA	***	nb	***	**	
A202	QGYKVLVLPNSVAAT	***	***	***	***	known DRB1*0401, 0701, DR11, DR15
A204	YKVLVLPNSVAATLG	***	***	***	***	new DR*0101
A206	VLVLPNSVAATLGFG	***	***	***	***	
C30	AVQWMNRLIAFASRG	*	nb	nb		known DR11, DQ5, also DR*0101
B60	NFISGIQYLAGLSTL	**		nb	**	
B62	ISGIQYLAGLSTLPG	***		***	**	
B64	GIQYLAGLSTLPGNP	***		***	**	known DR*0401, 1101
B66	QYLAGLSTLPGNPAL	*		***	**	new 0101, 0404, 0701
B68	LAGLSTLPGNPALAS	*		***	**	
C124	GHAVGIFRAAVCTRG	**		nb	**	known DR*0101, 0401, 0701
I620	TGQFDSVIDCNTCTQ	nb	nb			new DR*0404
I621	TGQFDSVIDCNTAVTQ	nb		nb	nb	known DR13, also DR*0101, 0401
I631	SGHRMAWDMMMNWSPT	nb		nb		known class II, also DR*0401
I632	TGHRMAWDMMMNWSPT	nb				known class II, also DR*0401

\*\*\* strong binding  
 \*\* intermediate binding  
 \* weak binding  
 nb no binding

Boldface peptide IDs indicate HLA-ligands with confirmed immunogenicity in HLA-transgenic mice

Boldface peptide sequences indicate putative core binding regions based on prediction algorithms as described in the text.

<sup>n)</sup> immunogenic in DRB1\*0401 transgenic mice

Some of the highly promiscuous peptides and/or with computer algorithm (SYFPEITHI, TEPITOPE)-predicted affinities were checked for binding to soluble HLA-DRB1\*1101 molecules in a peptide-competition assay as it is described for HLA-DRB1\*0701. Several known DR11 epitopes were used as controls and were confirmed to bind HLA-DRB1\*1101 molecules in vitro. Among newly identified HLA-DRB1\*1101 binders, there are peptides with IDs A120, A122, A141, C114, C134, 1426, 1628, 1629 of high affinity, 5 peptides with IDs C106, C135, 1578, 1547, 1604 of moderate affinity and 4 peptides with IDs B46, B48, B86, B96 of weak affinity ligands.

In summary eight novel ligands binding at least to HLA-DRB1\*0101, \*0401, \*0404, \*0701 and \*1101 (Tab. 2: peptide IDs A120, A122, A141, 1604, 1547, 1628, 1629, and Tab. 6: peptide ID 1426); novel 10 ligands binding at least to HLA-DRB1\*0101, \*0401, \*0404 and \*0701 (Tab. 2: peptide IDs A120-A124, B25-B30, B46-B48, B84-B92, C106, C113-C114, 1627, 1628, 1629, 1604); 5 novel ligands binding at least to HLA-DRB1\*0101, \*0401 and \*0701, 5 novel ligands binding at least to HLA-DRB1\*0101, \*0404 and \*0701, 4 novel ligands binding at least to HLA-DRB1\*0401, \*0404 and \*0701, 3 novel ligands binding at least to HLA-DRB1\*0101, \*0401 and \*0404, 2 novel ligands binding at least to HLA-DRB1\*0101 and \*0701, 1 novel ligand binding at least to HLA-DRB1\*0401 and \*0701, 3 novel ligands binding at least to HLA-DRB1\*0101, \*0401, 1 novel ligand binding at least to HLA-DRB1\*0404 and \*0701, 4 novel ligand binding at least to HLA-DRB1\*0101 and \*0404, 5 novel ligands binding at least to HLA-DRB1\*0701, 13 novel ligands binding at least to HLA-DRB1\*0101, 1 novel ligand binding at least to HLA-DRB1\*0401, and 6 novel ligands binding at least to HLA-DRB1\*0404.

Moreover, 12 known HLA class II epitopes were confirmed, in several cases binding to alleles not reported yet was demonstrated (Tab. 2, last group).

Having established physical binding too HLA class II it is straightforward to verify immunogenicity for a given ligand: for instance peptide IDs A120-A124, B46-B48, 1627, 1604, 1630, 1547, 1623, B112-118, 1558, all binding to one or more HLA class II alleles were also shown to be immunogenic in HLA-DRB1\*0401

transgenic mice (see Example II).

To determine the optimal epitope within a longer polypeptide, mice can be vaccinated with a longer polypeptide incorporating the candidate epitope sequences. Generation of specific CD4+ T cell responses against naturally processed and presented epitopes can then be assayed by re-stimulation of murine splenocytes or lymph node cells with overlapping 15-mers and IFN-gamma ELISpot. Final confirmation/validation of the newly identified HLA-ligands can be achieved by testing these peptides with T-cells from humans. Ideally, these comprise therapy responders or subjects spontaneously recovered from infection.

#### **Example II. Immunogenicity of HCV-derived peptides in HLA-transgenic mice**

Synthetic HCV-derived peptides (from conserved regions) were investigated for immunogenicity in HLA-transgenic mice: 36 of 68 peptides tested were found to induce peptide-specific IFN-gamma-producing cells in vaccination experiments. As summarized in Table 3, some peptides were either immunogenic (+, less than 100 peptide-specific cells among a million splenocytes) or even strongly immunogenic (+++, more than 100 peptide-specific cells among a million splenocytes) in DR4- and/or A\*0201-transgenic mice.

Table 3:

Ipep DB1*0401 A*0201 B*0702 Sequence				
1506		+		MSINFKPQRATKRTNRFPQDVKFPGGGQIVGGVILLPRRGRLGVRAKTKTSERSQ- PRGRRQPIPK
1526	+	+	+	VNLLFALLSPGALVGVVCAAILRRHVPGEGAVQNSRLIAPASRGNHVSPTHV
1545		+		IRGGRHLIFCHSKKCELA
1547	++		+++	YLWAYQATVCARAQPPPSND
1552		+	+	YLHPTGSGKSKVPVYATAAQGKVLVNLNPSVAATLGFQAY
1553		+		GAAVGSIGLGKVLVDILAGYGAGVAGLVAFKIMSGE
1555	+	+	+	GAAVGSIGLGKVLVDILAGYGAGISGALVAFKIMSGE

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1558	++	+	++	CGYRRCRASGVLTG
1559	+	++		PVNSWLGNTIMYAPT
1560	+	++		PVNSWLGNTIYAPT
1562			+	SGMFDSVVLCECTDAGCAWTELTPAETSVRLRAY
1563	+		+	SGMFDSVVLCECTDAGCAWTELTPAETTVRLRAY
1565	++	++	+	FWAGDGNFISGIQYLAGLSTLPGNPATIASLNAF
1577		+	+	GEVQVSTATQSFLLAT
1578			+	GEVQVLSVTQSFLOT
1580			+	FSDNSTFPFVPTQTV
1587		+	+	VNLLPGLSPGALVVGIVCAILRRRVGPGGAVQVQWDRLLIAPASRGNEVAPTSTY
1592	++	++	+	FWAGDGNFISGIQYLAGLSTLPGNPATIASLNAF
1604	++	++	++	VVCCSHSYTWGALITPC
1605	+	+	+	VVCCSHSYSWGALITPC
1615		+		LTPFHSAKSKPGTGAKDVR
1616	+			LTPFHSAKSKYGTGAKEVR
1617		+		LTPFHSAKSKYGTGAKEVR
1621	+	+	+	TGDFDSVIDCHVAVTQ
1623	+	+	+	YLVAYQATVCARAKAPPESMD
1624			+	LEDRDRSELSPLLSTTEW
1625	+			LEDRDRSELSPLLSTTEW
1627	+	+	++	PETDLELITSCHSVIVA
1628			++	VCGFVYCFTPSPVVVGTTDR
1630	++	++		LLFLLADARVCACLAH
1631	+	+		SGHDMAWDQDSWSPT
1632		+		TGHRMAWDQDSWSPT
1641		+		ITTSYTGKFLADGGCGGAYDIIICDECHS
1647		+	+	ARALANGVRVLEDDGVNATGNLPCCSFIFLLALLSC
1649	+			DPRHRSNVRKVIDTLTCSADLMGYIPVVGAPLGG
1650	++	++	+	VDYFRLWHPCTVNFITFVFRMYVGGVHEHL
1651	++	++	+	VDYFRLWHPCTVNFITFVFRMYVGGVHEHL
1652	++	+		KGGKPARLITVFPDLGVRVCEKDALYDV
1653		+		KGGKPARLITVFPDLGVRVCEKDALYDV
1654	++	+		IQLVNTNGSWHINRTALCNDSL
1655	++	+		IQLVNTNGSWHINRTALCNDSL
1656	+			LPALSTGLIHLNQNVDTQYLYG

Peptide 1526, 1565, 1631, also shown to be immunogenic in HLA-DRB1\*0401 transgenic mice contain known class II epitopes.

Peptide IDs 1526, 1553, 1565, 1587, 1623, 1630 also shown to be



immunogenic in HLA-A\*0201 transgenic mice contain known A2 epitopes.

For further characterizing the novel epitopes provided herewith, one may define the exact HLA restriction of these epitopes and the minimal epitopes within the sequences recognized by T cells. Both can be done by a variety of well-established approaches known to the one skilled in the art (Current Protocols in Immunology, John Wiley & Sons, Inc.).

First, publicly available programs can be used to predict T cell epitopes on the basis of binding motifs. These include for instance: [http://bimas.dcrt.nih.gov/molbio/hla\\_bind/](http://bimas.dcrt.nih.gov/molbio/hla_bind/) (Parker et al. 1994), <http://134.2.96.221/scripts/MHCServer.dll/home.htm> (Rammensee et al. 1999), <http://mypage.ihost.com/usinet.hamme76/> (Sturniolo et al. 1999). The latter prediction algorithm offers the possibility to identify promiscuous T helper-epitopes, i.e. peptides that bind to several HLA class II molecules. These predictions can be verified by testing of binding of the peptide to the respective HLA.

A way of quickly discerning whether the response towards a peptide is class I or class II restricted is to repeat the ELISpot assay with pure CD4+ or CD8+ T cell effector populations. This can for instance be achieved by isolation of the respective subset by means of magnetic cell sorting. Pure CD8+ T cells can also be tested in ELISpot assays together with artificial antigen-presenting-cells, expressing only one HLA molecule of interest. One example are HLA-A\*0201 positive T2 cells (174CEM.T2, Nijman et al., 1993). Alternatively, one can use ELISpot assays with whole PBMCs in the presence of monoclonal antibodies specifically blocking either the CD4+ or CD8+ T cell sub-population. Exact HLA restriction can be determined in a similar way, using blocking monoclonal antibodies specific for a certain allele. For example the response against an HLA-A24 restricted epitope can be specifically blocked by addition of an HLA-A24 specific monoclonal antibody.

For definition of the minimal epitopes within the peptide sequences recognized by T cells, one can test overlapping and

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truncated peptides (e.g. 8-, 9-, 10-mers) with splenocytes from immunized transgenic mice or T-cells from humans recognizing the respective epitope.

**Example III. HLA restriction of immunogenic HCV-derived peptides investigated in transgenic mice.**

Groups of 5 mice (HLA-A\*0201-, HLA-DRB1\*0401- and HLA-B\*0702 transgenic mice, male, 8-14 weeks of age) were injected subcutaneous into the hind footpads with 100µg of peptide + IC31 per mouse (50µg per footpad). (PCT/EP01/12041, WO 02/32451 A1 and PCT/EP01/06433, WO 01/93905 A1; IC31 is a combination of the immunizer disclosed in WO 01/93905 and WO 02/32451).

6 days after vaccination single cell suspension of pooled spleens were prepared and additionally pure fractions of CD8+ in the case of A2 and B7 tg mice (CD8+ fraction for B7 mice containing 97% of CD8 and 1.5% of CD4 cells and for A2 tg mice 83% of CD8 and 8% of CD4 cells) and CD4+ for DR4tg mice (CD4+ fraction for DR4tg mice containing 98% of CD4 cells and 0.2 % of CD8 cells) were separated from the spleen cell suspension using MACS separating kit (Miltenyi, Germany). All cells (not separated cells, positive and corresponding negative fractions) were restimulated ex vivo with relevant peptide (for instance Ipep1604) and irrelevant peptides as negative control (known HLA-DRB1\*0401 CMV-derived epitope Ipep 1505, HLA-B\*0702 HIV-derived epitope Ipep 1787, or HLA-A\*0201 tyrosinase-derived epitope Ipep1124) to detect INF-γ-producing cells in ELISpot assay.

As an example shown in Fig. 8-10 the Ipep1604 (VVCCSMSYTWGALITPC, in combination with immunizer IC31) was able to induce high numbers of specific INF-γ-producing T cells in all three transgenic class I and II mouse strains. This was shown not only with whole spleen derived cells but also with enriched fractions of CD8+ cells correspondingly for A2 and B7 and CD4+ cells for DR4tg mice. Similar, albeit weaker responses were seen with Ipep1605 (VVCCSMSYSWTGALITPC), a sequence variant with a serine instead of a threonine.

Thus, Ipep1604 contains class I epitopes for HLA-A\*0201 and HLA-B\*0702 and a class II epitope for HLA-DRB1\*0401 molecules.

As shown in Tables 2 and 6, Ipep 1604 binds to class II molecules in a promiscuous manner. Thus, it contains further epitopes, at least for HLA-DRB1\*0101, DRB1\*0404, DRB1\*0701 and DRB1\*1101.

Other peptides were analysed in a similar way:

Ipeps 1605, 1623, 1547, 1558, 1559, 1560, 1565, 1592, 1650, 1654 and 1655 were confirmed to contain human HLA-DRB1\*0401 epitopes. Again, for most of these epitopes binding is not limited to HLA-DRB1\*0401 as shown in Tables 2 and 6.

Ipeps 1565, 1605 and 1650 were confirmed to contain human HLA-A\*0201 epitopes.

Ipeps 1506, 1587 were confirmed to contain human HLA-B\*0702 epitopes.

Ipep 1843 with sequence LPRRGPRL was shown to be the HLA-B\*0702 minimal epitope contained in 1506:

Fig. 10 shows mouse IFN-gamma ELISpot with splenocytes or separated CD8+ or CD4+ cells from HLA-A\*0702 transgenic mice vaccinated with Ipep1506+IC31 or Ipep1835+IC31.

Fig. 10 A) and B) shows that after a single vaccination with either Ipep 1506+IC31 or Ipep1835+IC31, upon restimulation with overlapping 15mers, the 15mers A30 to A37 (see Tab.1) react. The common sequence of these 15mers is LPRRGPRL (Ipep 1843, see Tab.4).

Fig. 10 C) confirms these findings: after a single vaccination with either Ipep1506+IC31 or Ipep1835+IC31, significant interferon-gamma induction against Ipep1843 can be detected. In both cases Ipep 1790 an HIV NEF-derived HLA-B\*0702 epitope (sequence RPMTYKAAL was used as negative control for restimulation.

Ipep 1838 with sequence SPGALVVGVI (see Tab.4) was shown to be an HLA-B\*0702 minimal epitope contained in 1587:

In the case of Ipep1587 a different approach was taken: the sequence of Ipep1587 was inspected for HLA-B\*0702 binding motifs and a couple of short peptides were synthesized accordingly.

These were tested in a competition-type peptide binding assay using soluble HLA-B\*0702 and the FITC-labelled reference peptide LPCVLWPFVL, which is a known HLA-B\*0702 epitope derived from EBV (Stuber et al., 1995). Peptide Ipep1838 showed ~30% competition when used in 80-fold molar excess for 48h at 37°C. Thus it is likely to present the minimal HLA-B\*0702 epitope contained in Ipep 1587.

**Example IV: Identification and confirmation of novel HCV peptides reactive in IFN-gamma ELISpot with human PBMC from HCV therapy responders or patients with spontaneous recovery**

40 peptide mixtures in matrix format (Fig. 1) containing synthetic peptides derived from conserved regions of HCV (Table 1) were screened in IFN-gamma ELISpot using PBMC from more than 50 individuals who were either responders to interferon/ribavirin standard therapy, or, who had spontaneously cleared HCV (i.e. all subjects were HCV antibody positive, but HCV-RNA negative). PBMC from such individuals are supposed to contain the relevant T-cell populations responsible for clearing HCV. Thus, peptides discovered or confirmed by using these PBMC are likely to represent the structural determinants of immune protection against/clearance of HCV. Based on the results from this primary matrix-screen, a number of peptides were chosen for individual re-testing in IFN-gamma ELISpot using PBMC from selected donors. In addition, several new peptides incorporating sequences from overlapping reactive peptides or avoiding critical residues like cysteine were synthesized. These are summarized in Table 4.

**Table 4: additional peptides derived from conserved regions of HCV.**

Peptide ID	Peptide sequence (1 amino acid code)
1006	MWNFISGIQYLAGLSTLPGN
1334	HMWNFISGI
1425	NFISGIQYLAGLSTLPGNPA
1426	HMWNFISGIQYLAGLSTLPGNPA
1798	IGLGKVLVDILAGYGAGVAGALVAFK
1799	AAWYELTPAETTVRLR
1800	DYPYRLWHYPCTVNTIFKI
1836	DYPYRLWHYPCTVNTIFKI

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1801	AYSQQTRGLL
1827	TAYSQQTRGLLG
1829	SMSYTWGALITP
1838	SPGALVVGVI
1843	LPRRGPRRL

Results of the secondary screening with individual peptides are summarized in **Table 5**. Altogether ~20% of subjects (G05, G18, H02, H03, H04, H10, H12, H19, H32, H38) showed a significant IFN-gamma T-cell response against one or more of the peptides. In some cases the observed number of ELISPOTs was clearly elevated, but not statistically significant above background. In these cases, PBMC (donors H03, H10, H33, H38) were stimulated with the respective peptides in vitro (2 rounds of in vitro priming, see Material & Methods) in order to increase the peptide specific response. Several peptides were confirmed in this way, results are again summarized in Table 5.

Peptides A3-A7 represent overlapping 15mers spanning the sequence TNPKPQRKTKRNTNRRPQD. Since they all react with PBMC from donor H03, the minimal sequence of the epitope is located within the sequence PQRKTKRNTNR. Prediction algorithms indicate that QRKTKRNTN and QRKTKRNT represent ligands of HLA-B\*08, whereas RKTKRNTNR most probably binds to HLA-B\*2705.

Peptides C64-C70 represent overlapping 15mers spanning the sequence KGGRRKPARLIVFPDLGVRVCE. C64 and C70 react with PBMC from donor H32 and H38, respectively. The minimal sequence of the epitope is therefore located within the sequence ARLIVFPDL. Prediction algorithms indicate that ARLIVFPDL represents a ligand of HLA-B\*2705 and HLA-B\*2709.

**Table 5. Summary of HCV peptides reactive with PBMC.**

Numbers represent peptide-specific IFN-gamma secreting T-cells/10<sup>6</sup> PBMC calculated from ELISPOT results (duplicate determinations); values > 8 (>3x over background) were regarded statistically significant. Donors H32 and H33 are spontaneously recovered patients.









**Example V. Binding of HCV derived peptides to HLA class II molecules**

In addition to the peptides listed in Table 1, several new peptides incorporating sequences from overlapping reactive peptides or avoiding critical residues like cysteine were synthesized (Table 4). These were retested for their affinities to class II soluble HLA molecules, and results were compared to those obtained with the original (Table 6).

**Table 6. Binding of selected HCV-derived peptides and their 15-mer counterparts to soluble HLA class II molecules ("++" strong affinity, "+" intermediate affinity, "+" weak affinity, "-" no affinity, "nd" not done; core binding motifs are underlined).**

Peptide ID	Peptide sequences	Binding to soluble HLA-DRB1*				
		0101	0401	0404	0701	1101
1798	IGL <u>GLKVLVD</u> ILAGYGAGVAGALVAFK	-	-	+	++	+/-
B84	GSIGL <u>GLKVLVD</u> ILAG	+	+	+		-
B86	IGL <u>GLKVLVD</u> ILAGYG	+	++	+	+	+/-
B88	<u>L</u> GLKVLVDILAGYGAG	+	++	+		
B92	LVDILAGYGAGVAGA	+	-			
B94	DILAGYGAGVAGALV	+	-	-	-	
B96	L <u>AGYGAGVAGALVAF</u>	++	++	-	+/-	+/-
1799	AAWYELTPAETT <u>VRLR</u>	+++	+	+	-	+/-
B46	AGAAWYELTPAETTV	+++	+++	+++	-	+/-
B48	AAWYELTPAETT <u>VRL</u>	+++	+++	+++	-	+/-
1827	TAYSQQTRGLLG	++	-	+/-	+	+
C114	TAYSQQTRGLGCIIV	+++	+/-	+/-	+	++
1829	SMSYTWIGALITP	+	-	-	+	+/-
1604	VVCCSMSYTWIGALITPC	+	+	++	++	+
1650	VDYFYRLWHYPC <u>TVNFTIFKVRMYVGGVEHRL</u>					
A130	DYFYRLWHYPC <u>TVN</u> F	+	++	+/-		
A131	YFYRLWHYPC <u>TVN</u> FT		-			
A135	<u>LNHYPC</u> TVNFTIFKV	-	-		++	

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A141	TVNFTIFKVRMYVGG	-	-	+/-	++
A145	TIFKVRMYVGGVEHR	+/-	-		
<b>1651</b>	VDYPYRLWHYPCTVNYTIFKIRMYVGGVEHRL				
1800	DYPYRLWHYPCTVNYTIFKI	-	-	+/-	++ -
A147	DYPYRLWHYPCTVNY	-	-		
A152	LWHYPCTVNYTIFKI	-	-		
A158	TVNYTIFKIRMYVGG	-	-	+/-	
A162	TIFKIRMYVGGVEHR	+/-	-		
1817	RMYVGGVEHRL	-	-	+/-	
<b>1426</b>	HMWNFISGIQYLAGLSTLPGNPA	+	+	++	++ +
1425	NFISGIQYLAGLSTLPGNPA	++	++	++	nd nd
1006	MWNFISGIQYLAGLSTLPGN	++	+	++	nd nd

Abolished affinities to DRB1\*0101 and DRB1\*0401 molecules in the case of peptide 1798 in comparison with its shorter counterparts (B84 - B96) is probably due to the long sequence (26 amino acids) which can have a secondary structure that prevents binding. It is to be expected that in vivo, upon proteolytic cleavage, peptide 1798 will give rise to two shorter class II epitopes. Removed cysteine (C) residues in peptides 1827 and 1829 (derivatives of peptides C114 and 1604, respectively) seem to be crucial for binding to DRB1\*0401 molecules but do not essentially change affinities to other tested DR subtypes.

#### **Example VI. Identification and Characterization of HCV-epitope hotspots**

Here, a T-cell epitope hotspot (thereafter referred to as "hotspot") is defined as a short peptide sequence at least comprising more than one T-cell epitope. For example, two or more epitopes may be located shortly after each other (shortly being defined as less than 5-10 amino acids), or directly after each other, or partially or even fully over-lapping. Hotspots may contain only class I or class II epitopes, or a combination of both. Epitopes in hotspots may have different HLA restrictions.

Due to the highly complex and selective pathways of class I and class II antigen processing, referred to in the introduction, T-cell epitopes cannot be easily predicted within the sequence of a polypeptide. Though widely used, computer algorithms for T-cell epitope prediction have a high rate of both false-negatives and false-positives.

Thus, as even individual T-cell epitopes are not obvious within the sequence of a polypeptide, the same is even more the case for hotspots. Several radically different experimental approaches are combined according to the present invention for T-cell epitope identification, including epitope capture, HLA-transgenic animals and *in vitro* stimulation of human mononuclear cells. All three approaches are systematically applied on overlapping peptides spanning the antigen of interest, enabling comprehensive identification of epitopes (refer to CMV Epitope Capture patent). Upon such a comprehensive analysis, not limited to a particular HLA allele, but rather unravelling all possibly targeted epitopes within a population, epitope hotspots may become apparent. Within an antigen, only few if any sequences show characteristics of hotspots. Thus the identification of a hotspot is always a surprising event:

T-cell epitope hotspots offer important advantages: Hotspots can activate and can be recognized by different T-cell clones of a subject. Hotspots (when comprising epitopes with different HLA restriction) can interact with T-cells from different non HLA-matched individuals.

Epitope-based vaccines, so far have aimed at selected prevalent HLA-alleles, for instance HLA-A2, which is expressed in about half of Caucasians. Since other alleles are less frequent, epitope-based vaccines with broad worldwide population coverage will have to comprise many different epitopes. The number of chemical entities (for instance peptides) of a vaccine is limited by constraints originating from manufacturing, formulation and product stability.

Hotspots enable such epitope-based vaccines with broad worldwide population coverage, as they provide a potentially high number

of epitopes by a limited number of peptides.

**Table 7: T-cell epitope hotspots in conserved regions of HCV.**  
Hotspots (incl. some variations) are shown in bold, epitopes contained within the hotspots in normal font. Peptide number and sequence, as well as HLA-class I and class II coverage are given. Source data refers to Examples and Tables within this specification, or literature references.

peptide		class I	class II	source data
ID	peptide sequence			
1835	KFPGGGQIVGGVILLPRRGFRLGVRATRK	A2, A3, B7	DR11	Example III, VI
83	KFPGGGQIVGGVILLPRRGFRL	A2	B7	DR11
1051	YLLPRRGFRL	A2		Bategay 1995
1843	LPRRGFRL	B7		Example III
	GFRLGVRAT	B7		Koziel 1993
	RLGVRATRK	A3		Chang 1999
84	GYKVLVLNPSVAAT		DR1,4,7,11	Tab.2:A200-A206
	AYAAQGYKVL	A24		prediction
84EX	AYAAQGYKVLVLNPSVAAT	A24	DR1,4,7,11	Example VI
87	DLMGYIPAV	A2		Sarobe 1998
	GYIPLVGAPL	A24		prediction
87EX	DLMGYIPLVGAPL	A2,A24		Example VI
89	CINGVCWTV	A2		Koziel 1995
1577	GEVQVVSTATQSFLAT		DR 4, 7	Tab.2
89EX	GEVQVVSTATQSFLATCINGVCWTV	A2	DR 4, 7	Example VI
1426	HMWNFISGIQYLAGLSTLPGNPA	A2	DR1,4,7,11	Example VII
1006	MWNFISGIQYLAGLSTLPGN			Example VII
1425	NFISGIQYLAGLSTLPGNPA			Example VII
	QYLAGLSTL	A24		prediction
1334	HMWNFISGI	A2		Wentworth 1996
1650	VDYPYRLWHYPCTVNFITIFKVRMYVGGVEHRL	Cw7,A2,A24, A11,A3	DR1,4,7,11	Tab. 2,3,6
1836	DYPYRLWHYPCTVNFITIFI	Cw7,A2,A24, A11	DR1,4,7,11	Tab. 2,3,6
1846	DYPYRLWHYPCTVNFITIFV	Cw7,A2,A24, A11	DR1,4,7,11	Tab. 2,3,6
1651	VDYPYRLWHYPCTVNFITIFKIRMYVGGVEHRL			Example III
1800	DYPYRLWHYPCTVNFITIFI	Cw7,A24,A11	DR7	Tab. 2,3,6
1754	DYPYRLWHY	Cw7		Tab. 2,5,6
1815	TVNYTIFKI	A11		Lauer 2002
				prediction

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1816	TINYTIFK	A11	Koziel 1995
	TVNFTIFKV	A11	prediction
	HYPCTVNYTI	A24	prediction
	HYPCTVNFNTI	A24	prediction
	RMVVGGEVHR	A3	Chang 1999
1799	AANYELTPAETTVRLR	B7? B35	DR1, 4 Tab. 2, 5, 6
1818	TPAETTVRL	B7? B35	Ibe 1998
1827EX	GWRL LAPITAYSQQTRGLLGCTV	A2, A3, A24,	DR1, 4, 7, 11 Example VI
		B8	
C114	TAYSQQTRGLLGCTV	A24, B8?	DR1, 4, 7, 11 Tab. 2, 6
1827	TAYSQQTRGLLG	A24, B8	DR1, 7, 11 Tab. 6
C112	GQGWRL LAPITAYSQ	A3?, A2?,	DR1 Tab. 2, 5
	RL LAPITAY	A3	prediction
C114EX	GQGWRL LAPITAYSQQTRGLLGCTV	A24, A3?, A2?,	DR1, 4, 7, 11 Tab. 2, 5, 6
		B8?	
		A24, A3?, A2?,	DR1, 7, 11 Tab. 2, 5, 6
1827EX	GQGWRL LAPITAYSQQTRGLLG	B8?	
1801	AYSQQTRGLL	A24	Tab. 5
1819	AYSQQTRGL	A24	Kurokouchi 2001
1798	IGLGVLDILAGYGAGVAGALVAFK	A2, 24, 3, 11	DR1, 4, 7 Tab. 2, 3, 5, 6
1820	ILAGYGAGV	A2	Bategay 1995
1821	VAGALVAFK	A3, 11	Chang 1999
	GYGAGVAGAL	A24	prediction
1604	VVCCSMSYTWGALITPC	A2, A24, B7	DR1, 4, 7, 11 Tab. 2, 3, 6
1829	SMSYTWGALITP	A2, A24, B7,	DR1, 7, 11 Tab. 6
	SMSYTWGAL	A2, B7	prediction
	SYTWGALI	A24	prediction
1579	FTDNSSPPAVPQTFQV	A1, 2, B7, 51	DR53=B4*01 Tab. 5
1624	LEDRDRSELSPLLLSTTEW	A1, 2, 3, 26	DR7 Tab. 2, 3, 5
		B8, 27, 4402, 60	
1848	LEDRDRSELSPLLLST	A1, 2, 3, 26,	DR7 Example VI
		B8, 27, 4402, 60	
	RSELSPLLL	A1	prediction
	ELSPLLLST	A2, A3	prediction
	DRDRSELSP	A26, B27	prediction
	LEDRDRSEL	B08, B4402	prediction
1824	LEDRDRSEL	B60	Wong 2001
1547	YLVA YQATVCARAQAPPPSWD	A2	DR1, 4, 7, 11 Tab. 2, 3
1822	YLVA YQATV	A2	Wentworth 1996
A1A7	MSTNPKPQRKTRNTNR	A11, B08, B27	Tab. 5

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A3A7	PQRKTKRNTNR	B08, B27	Tab.5
	QRKTKRNTNR	B08	prediction
	RKTKRNTNR	B2705	prediction
	MSTNPKPQR	A11	prediction
	MSTNPKPKQ	A11	Wong 1998
<b>A122EX</b>	<b>LINTNGSWHINRTALNCNDSL</b>	<b>A2, 2, 3, B8</b>	<b>DR1, 4, 7, 11 Tab.2, 3</b>
A122	NGSWHINRTALNCNDSL	A2	DR1, 4, 7, 11 Tab.2, 3
	LINTNGSWHI	A2, 3	prediction
	RTALNCNDSL	A2	prediction
1825	LINTNGSWHINRTALN	A2, 3, B8	prediction
1826	SWHINRTALN	B8	prediction
<b>A241</b>	<b>TTILGIGTVLDQAET</b>	<b>A2, A3</b>	<b>DR1, 4 Tab.2, 5</b>
	TTILGIGTV	A2	prediction
	TILGIGTVL	A3	prediction
<b>B8B38</b>	<b>FDSSVLCECYDAGAAYE</b>	<b>A1, 2, 3, 26</b>	<b>Tab.5</b>
B8	FDSSVLCECYDAGCA	A3, A26	Tab.5
	VLCECYDAGA	A2	prediction
B38	VVLCECYDAGAAYE	A1	Tab.5
<b>C70EX</b>	<b>ARLIVFPDLGVRVCEKMALY</b>	<b>A2, A3, B27</b>	<b>Tab.5</b>
C64-C70	ARLIVFPDL	B*2705?, *2709?	Tab.5
1831	RLIVFPDLGV	A2	Gruener 2000
1832	RVCEKMALY	A3	Wong 1998
<b>C92</b>	<b>AFCSAMTVGDLGSGV</b>	<b>A2, B51</b>	<b>DR1, 4 Tab.2, 5</b>
<b>C97</b>	<b>GVLFGLAYFSMVGNW</b>	<b>A2, 3, 26, B2705, 51</b>	<b>DR1, 4, 7 Tab.5</b>
<b>C106</b>	<b>TRVPYFVRAQGLIRA</b>	<b>A3, 24, B7, B8, B2705</b>	<b>DR1, 4, 7 Tab.2, 5</b>
<b>C134</b>	<b>TLFLFNILGGWVAQ</b>	<b>A2</b>	<b>DR1, 7, 11 Tab.2, 5</b>
1823	LLFNILGGWV	A2	Bategay 1995

**Example VII. HCV epitope hotspot Ipep 1426 contains at least HLA-A\*0201 and several promiscuous class II T-cell epitopes**

The major objective of this experiment was to compare the immunogenicity of the "hotspot" Ipep 1426, which contains at least one HLA-A\*0201 epitope (Ipep 1334) and 2 promiscuous class II epitopes (Ipeps 1006 and 1425), to the individual epitopes. To this end peripheral blood mononuclear cells (PBMC) from several healthy HLA-typed blood donors were stimulated in vitro either with 1426 or a mixture of 1334, 1006, 1425. Three rounds of

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stimulation were performed resulting in oligoclonal T cell lines. Then, responses against all four peptides were assessed by interferon-gamma (IFN- $\gamma$ ) ELISpot analysis.

Peptide 1426, induces T cell responses similarly well as individual epitopes comprised within its sequence. In particular, CD8 positive T cells directed against the HLA-A\*0201 restricted epitope 1334 were successfully generated.

**Table 8: peptide induced IFN- $\gamma$  secretion of oligoclonal T cell lines.** Lines were generated from two HLA-typed healthy individuals by 3 rounds of in vitro priming with either peptide 1426 or a mixture of peptides 1006+1425+1334. The reactivity of CD4 and CD8 positive T cells in these lines was assessed by IFN- $\gamma$  ELISpot ("+++" very strong, "++" strong, "+" significant, "-" no IFN-gamma secretion).

Donor HLA	A*0201, A*03, B7, B60; DRB1*1501, -B1*1302		A*0206, A*01, B27, B50; DRB1*0401, -B1*1402	
Peptide ID	line raised against	line raised against	line raised against	line raised against
	1426	1006+1425+1334	1426	1006+1425+1334
	4		4	
1006	++	++	++	++
1425	+++	+++	+++	++
1334	+	+	-	-
1006+1425+1334	++	++	++	++
1426	+++	+++	+++	++
84 (HCV derived negative control)	-	-	-	-

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## Claims:

1. Method for isolating Hepatitis C Virus peptides (HVs) which have a binding capacity to a MHC/HLA molecule or a complex comprising said HCV-peptide and said MHC/HLA molecule characterized by the following steps:

- providing a pool of HCV-peptide, said pool containing HCV-peptides which bind to said MHC/HLA molecule and HCV-peptides which do not bind to said MHC/HLA molecule,
- contacting said MHC/HLA molecule with said pool of HCV-peptides whereby a HCV-peptide which has a binding capacity to said MHC/HLA molecule binds to said MHC/HLA molecule and a complex comprising said HCV-peptide and said MHC/HLA molecule is formed,
- detecting and optionally separating said complex from the HCV-peptides which do not bind to said MHC/HLA molecule and
- optionally isolating and characterising the HCV-peptide from said complex.

2. Method for isolating HCV T cell epitopes which have a binding capacity to a MHC/HLA molecule or a complex comprising said epitope and said MHC/HLA molecule characterized by the following steps:

- providing a pool of HCV-peptides, said pool containing HCV-peptides which bind to a MHC/HLA molecule and HCV-peptides which do not bind to said MHC/HLA molecule,
- contacting said MHC/HLA molecule with said pool of HCV-peptides whereby a HCV-peptide which has a binding capacity to said MHC/HLA molecule binds to said MHC/HLA molecule and a complex comprising said HCV-peptide and said MHC/HLA molecule is formed,
- detecting and optionally separating said complex from the HCV-peptides which do not bind to said MHC/HLA molecule,
- optionally isolating and characterising the HCV-peptide from said complex,
- assaying said optionally isolated HCV-peptide or said complex in a T cell assay for T cell activation capacity and
- providing the optionally isolated HCV-peptide with a T cell activation capacity as HCV T cell epitope or as complex.

3. Method according to claim 1 or 2, characterized in that said pool of HCV-peptides is selected from the group consisting of a pool of peptides, especially overlapping peptides, a pool of protein fragments, a pool of modified peptides, a pool obtained from antigen-presenting cells, preferably in the form of total lysates or fractions thereof, especially fractions eluted from the surface or the MHC/HLA molecules of these cells, a pool comprised of fragments of cells, especially HCV-containing cells, tumor cells or tissues, especially from liver, a pool comprised of peptide libraries, pools of (poly)-peptides generated from recombinant DNA libraries, especially derived from pathogens or tumor cells, a pool of proteins and/or protein fragments from HCV or mixtures thereof.

4. Method according to any one of claims 1 to 3, characterized in that said MHC/HLA molecules are selected from HLA class I molecules, HLA class II molecules, non classical MHC/HLA and MHC/HLA-like molecules or mixtures thereof, or mixtures thereof.

5. Method according to any one of claims 1 to 4, characterized in that said characterising of the HCV-peptides of the complex is performed by using a method selected from the group consisting of mass spectroscopy, polypeptide sequencing, binding assays, especially SDS-stability assays, identification of HCV-peptides by determination of their retention factors by chromatography, especially HPLC, or other spectroscopic techniques, especially violet (UV), infra-red (IR), nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR), circular dichroism (CD) or electron spin resonance (ESR), or combinations thereof.

6. Method according to any one of claims 1 to 5, characterized in that it is combined with a cytokine secretion assay, preferably with an Elispot assay, an intracellular cytokine staining, FACS or an ELISA.

7. Method according to any one of claims 1 to 6, characterized in that said T cell assay comprises the mixing and incubation of said complex with isolated T cells and subsequent measuring cytokine secretion or proliferation of said isolated T cells.

8. Method according to any one of claims 1 to 6, characterized in that said T cell assay comprises measuring up-regulation of activation markers, especially CD69, CD38, or down-regulation of surface markers, especially CD3, CD8 or TCR.

9. Method according to any one of claims 1 to 8, characterized in that said T cell assay comprises measuring up-/down-regulation of mRNAs involved in T cell activation, especially by real-time RT-PCR.

10. Method according to any one of claims 1 to 8, characterized in that said T cell assay is selected from T cell assays measuring phosphorylation/de-phosphorylation of components downstream of the T cell receptor, especially p56 lck, ITAMS of the TCR and the zeta chain, ZAP70, LAT, SLP-76, fyn, and lyn, T cell assays measuring intracellular  $Ca^{++}$  concentration or activation of  $Ca^{++}$ -dependent proteins, T cell assays measuring formation of immunological synapses, T cell assays measuring release of effector molecules, especially perforin, granzymes or granulolysin or combinations of such T cell assays.

11. T cell epitopes identifiable by a method according to any one of claims 2 to 10, said T cell epitopes being selected from the group consisting of polypeptides A120-A124, B25-B30, B46-B48, B84-B92, C106, C113-C114, 1627, 1628, 1629, 1604, 1630, C97, 1547, B94-B98, A272-A276, B120, B122, C108, C134, C152, 1606, 1607, 1577, 1578, B50-52, 1623, C130, 1603, C96, C191, A216-A224, A242-A244, C92-C93, A174, B32-B38, B100-B102, C135, C162, 1618, 1622, 1624, 1546, 1556, A114, B58, B112-B118, B18-B22, C112, C116, C122, C127, C144, C159-C160, C174, 1558, 1581, C95, C129, C157-C158, A254-A258, 1605, C109, C161, 1547, 1555, 1558, 1559, 1560, 1563, 1592, 1605, 1616, 1621, 1623, 1625, 1649, 1650, 1651, 1652, 1654, 1655, 1656, 1545, 1552, 1557, 1615, 1617, 1631, 1632, 1641, 1647, 1653, A141, C114, C134, C135 and 1426.

12. HLA A0201 binding epitopes with T cell activating capacity identifiable by a method according to any one of claims 2 to 10 using HLA A0201 molecules as MHC/HLA molecules, said HLA A0201

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binding epitopes being selected from the group consisting of polypeptides 1545, 1552, 1555, 1558, 1559, 1560, 1577, 1592, 1604, 1605, 1615, 1617, 1621, 1627, 1631, 1632, 1641, 1647, 1650, 1651, 1652, 1653, 1654, 1655 as specified in Table 1.

13. HLA-B\*0702 binding epitopes with T cell activating capacity identifiable by a method according to any one of claims 2 to 10 using HLA-B\*0702 molecules as MHC/HLA molecules, said HLA B\*0702 binding epitopes being selected from the group consisting of polypeptides 1506, 1526, 1547, 1552, 1553, 1555, 1558, 1562, 1563, 1565, 1577, 1578, 1580, 1587, 1592, 1604, 1605, 1621, 1623, 1624, 1627, 1628, 1647, 1650, 1651, 1843 with sequence LPRRGPR (contained in 1506) and 1838 with sequence SPGALVVGVI (contained in 1587) as minimal HLA-B\*0702 epitopes.

14. Epitope or peptide according to any one of claims 11 to 13 characterized in that it further comprises 1 to 30, preferably 2 to 10, especially 2 to 6, naturally occurring amino acid residues, especially at the N-terminus, the C-terminus or at the N- and C-terminus.

15. Epitope or peptide according to any one of claims 11 to 14, characterized in that it further comprises a non-naturally occurring amino acid(s), preferably 1 to 1000, more preferred 2 to 100, especially 2 to 20 non-naturally occurring amino acid residues, at the N-terminus, the C-terminus or at the N- and C-terminus.

16. Use of an epitope or peptide according to any one of claims 11 to 14 for the preparation of a vaccine, especially of a HLA restricted vaccine, for treating or preventing hepatitis C virus (HCV) infections.

17. Vaccine for treating or preventing hepatitis C virus (HCV) infections comprising an epitope according to any one of claims 11 to 15.

18. HLA specific vaccine for treating or preventing hepatitis C virus (HCV) infections comprising an epitope or peptide according to any one of claims 11 to 15.

19. Vaccine as defined in any one of claims 16 to 18, characterized in that it further comprises an immunomodulating substance, preferably selected from the group consisting of polycationic substances, especially polycationic polypeptides, immunomodulating nucleic acids, especially deoxyinosine and/or deoxyuracile containing oligodeoxynucleotides, or mixtures thereof.
20. Vaccine as defined in any one of claims 16 to 19, characterized in that it further comprises a pharmaceutically acceptable carrier.
21. Vaccine as defined in any one of claims 16 to 20, characterized in that said epitope is provided in a form selected from peptides, peptide analogues, proteins, naked DNA, RNA, viral vectors, virus-like particles, recombinant/chimeric viruses, recombinant bacteria or dendritic cells pulsed with protein/peptide/RNA or transfected with DNA comprising the epitopes.
22. T cells, a T cell clone or a T cell population or preparation specifically recognizing an epitope or peptide according to any one of claims 11 to 15.
23. Use of T cells, a T cell clone or a T cell population or preparation according to claim 22 for identification of heteroclitic epitopes.
24. Use of T cells, a T cell clone or a T cell population or preparation according to claim 22 for the preparation of a composition for therapy of HCV patients.
25. Use of the peptides with formulae QRKTKRNTN or QRKTKRNT, or 1615, 1616, 1617 in particular 9meric peptides derived from the latter 3 peptides with formulae SAKSKFGYG, SAKSKYGYG, or SARSKYGYG as HLA-B\*08 epitopes, especially for the preparation of a pharmaceutical preparation for a HLA-B\*08 specific vaccine.
26. Use of the peptides with the formulae RKTKRNTNR as HLA-B\*2705 epitope, especially for the preparation of a pharmaceut-

ical preparation for a HLA-B\*2705 specific vaccine.

27. Use of the peptides with the formulae ARLIVFPDL as HLA-B\*2705 and HLA-B\*2709 specific vaccine.

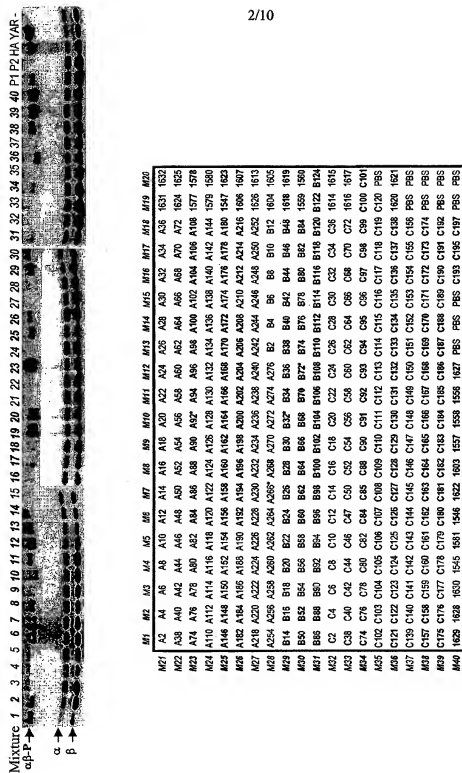
28. Use of peptides as specified in Tab. 7, said peptides representing T-cell epitope hotspot and selected from the group of peptides 1835, 84EX, 87EX, 89EX, 1426, 1650, 1836, 1846, 1651, 1800, 1799, C114, 1827, C112, C114EX, 1827EX, 1798, 1604, 1829, 1579, 1624, 1848, 1547, A1A7, A122EX, A122, 1825, A241, B8B38, C70EX, C92, C97, C106, and C134.

Figure 1. HCV peptide array

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8	M9	M10	M11	M12	M13	M14	M15	M16	M17	M18	M19	M20
M21	A2	A4	A6	A8	A10	A12	A14	A16	A18	A20	A22	A24	A26	A28	A30	A32	A34	A36	1631	1632
M22	A38	A40	A42	A44	A46	A48	A50	A52	A54	A56	A58	A60	A62	A64	A66	A68	A70	A72	1624	1625
M23	A74	A76	A78	A80	A82	A84	A86	A88	A90	A92*	A94	A96	A98	A100	A102	A104	A106	A108	1577	1578
M24	A110	A112	A114	A116	A118	A120	A122	A124	A126	A128	A130	A132	A134	A136	A138	A140	A142	A144	1579	1580
M25	A146	A148	A150	A152	A154	A156	A158	A160	A162	A164	A166	A168	A170	A172	A174	A176	A178	A180	1571	1623
M26	A182	A184	A186	A188	A190	A192	A194	A196	A198	A200	A202	A204	A206	A208	A210	A212	A214	A216	1606	1607
M27	A218	A220	A222	A224	A226	A228	A230	A232	A234	A236	A238	A240	A242	A244	A246	A248	A250	A252	1626	1613
M28	A254	A256	A258	A260	A262	A264	A266*	A268	A270	A272	A274	A276	B2	B4	B6	B8	B10	B12	1604	1605
M29	B14	B16	B18	B20	B22	B24	B26	B28	B30	B32*	B34	B36	B38	B40	B42	B44	B46	B48	1618	1619
M30	B50	B52	B54	B56	B58	B60	B62	B64	B66	B68	B70	B72*	B74	B76	B78	B80	B82	B84	1559	1560
M31	B86	B88	B90	B92	B94	B96	B98	B100	B102	B104	B106	B108	B110	B112	B114	B116	B118	B120	B122	B124
M32	C2	C4	C6	C8	C10	C12	C14	C16	C18	C20	C22	C24	C26	C28	C30	C32	C34	C36	1614	1615
M33	C38	C40	C42	C44	C46	C48	C50	C52	C54	C56	C58	C60	C62	C64	C66	C68	C70	C72	1616	1617
M34	C74	C76	C78	C80	C82	C84	C86	C88	C90	C92	C94	C96	C98	C100	C102	C104	C106	C108	C110	C112
M35	C112	C114	C116	C118	C120	C122	C124	C126	C128	C130	C132	C134	C136	C138	C140	C142	C144	C146	C148	C150
M36	C152	C154	C156	C158	C160	C162	C164	C166	C168	C170	C172	C174	C176	C178	C180	C182	C184	C186	C188	C190
M37	C192	C194	C196	C198	C200	C202	C204	C206	C208	C210	C212	C214	C216	C218	C220	C222	C224	C226	C228	C230
M38	C232	C234	C236	C238	C240	C242	C244	C246	C248	C250	C252	C254	C256	C258	C260	C262	C264	C266	C268	C270
M39	C272	C274	C276	C278	C280	C282	C284	C286	C288	C290	C292	C294	C296	C298	C300	C302	C304	C306	C308	C310
M40	C312	C314	C316	C318	C320	C322	C324	C326	C328	C330	C332	C334	C336	C338	C340	C342	C344	C346	C348	C350

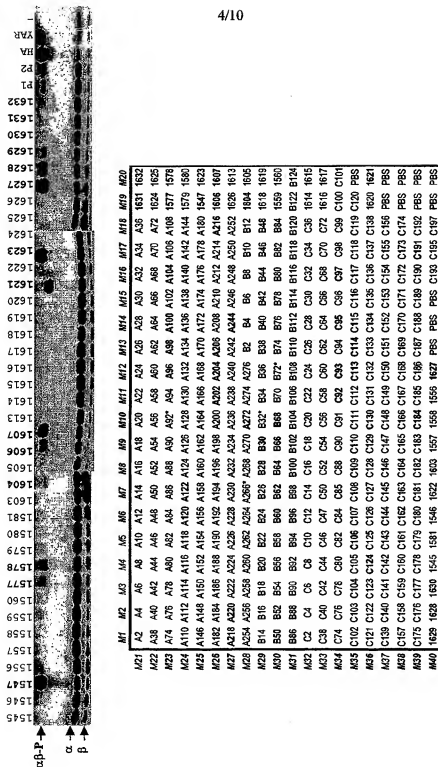


Figure 2. Peptide pools that bind to DRBI\*0401



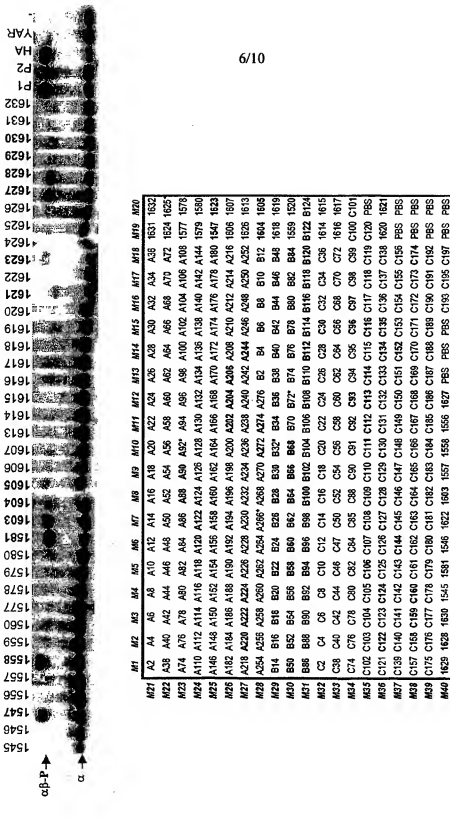


**Figure 4. Individual peptides that bind to DRB1\*0401**



M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8	M9	M10	M11	M12	M13	M14	M15	M16	M17	M18	M19	M20
M21	M22	M23	M24	M25	M26	M27	M28	M29	M30	M31	M32	M33	M34	M35	M36	M37	M38	M39	M40
M41	M42	M43	M44	M45	M46	M47	M48	M49	M50	M51	M52	M53	M54	M55	M56	M57	M58	M59	M60
M61	M62	M63	M64	M65	M66	M67	M68	M69	M70	M71	M72	M73	M74	M75	M76	M77	M78	M79	M80
M81	M82	M83	M84	M85	M86	M87	M88	M89	M90	M91	M92	M93	M94	M95	M96	M97	M98	M99	M100
M101	M102	M103	M104	M105	M106	M107	M108	M109	M110	M111	M112	M113	M114	M115	M116	M117	M118	M119	M120
M121	M122	M123	M124	M125	M126	M127	M128	M129	M130	M131	M132	M133	M134	M135	M136	M137	M138	M139	M140
M141	M142	M143	M144	M145	M146	M147	M148	M149	M150	M151	M152	M153	M154	M155	M156	M157	M158	M159	M160
M161	M162	M163	M164	M165	M166	M167	M168	M169	M170	M171	M172	M173	M174	M175	M176	M177	M178	M179	M180
M181	M182	M183	M184	M185	M186	M187	M188	M189	M190	M191	M192	M193	M194	M195	M196	M197	M198	M199	M200
M201	M202	M203	M204	M205	M206	M207	M208	M209	M210	M211	M212	M213	M214	M215	M216	M217	M218	M219	M220
M221	M222	M223	M224	M225	M226	M227	M228	M229	M230	M231	M232	M233	M234	M235	M236	M237	M238	M239	M240
M241	M242	M243	M244	M245	M246	M247	M248	M249	M250	M251	M252	M253	M254	M255	M256	M257	M258	M259	M260
M261	M262	M263	M264	M265	M266	M267	M268	M269	M270	M271	M272	M273	M274	M275	M276	M277	M278	M279	M280
M281	M282	M283	M284	M285	M286	M287	M288	M289	M290	M291	M292	M293	M294	M295	M296	M297	M298	M299	M300
M301	M302	M303	M304	M305	M306	M307	M308	M309	M310	M311	M312	M313	M314	M315	M316	M317	M318	M319	M320
M321	M322	M323	M324	M325	M326	M327	M328	M329	M330	M331	M332	M333	M334	M335	M336	M337	M338	M339	M340
M341	M342	M343	M344	M345	M346	M347	M348	M349	M350	M351	M352	M353	M354	M355	M356	M357	M358	M359	M360
M361	M362	M363	M364	M365	M366	M367	M368	M369	M370	M371	M372	M373	M374	M375	M376	M377	M378	M379	M380
M381	M382	M383	M384	M385	M386	M387	M388	M389	M390	M391	M392	M393	M394	M395	M396	M397	M398	M399	M400
M401	M402	M403	M404	M405	M406	M407	M408	M409	M410	M411	M412	M413	M414	M415	M416	M417	M418	M419	M420
M421	M422	M423	M424	M425	M426	M427	M428	M429	M430	M431	M432	M433	M434	M435	M436	M437	M438	M439	M440
M441	M442	M443	M444	M445	M446	M447	M448	M449	M450	M451	M452	M453	M454	M455	M456	M457	M458	M459	M460
M461	M462	M463	M464	M465	M466	M467	M468	M469	M470	M471	M472	M473	M474	M475	M476	M477	M478	M479	M480
M481	M482	M483	M484	M485	M486	M487	M488	M489	M490	M491	M492	M493	M494	M495	M496	M497	M498	M499	M500
M491	M492	M493	M494	M495	M496	M497	M498	M499	M500	M501	M502	M503	M504	M505	M506	M507	M508	M509	M510
M501	M502	M503	M504	M505	M506	M507	M508	M509	M510	M511	M512	M513	M514	M515	M516	M517	M518	M519	M520
M511	M512	M513	M514	M515	M516	M517	M518	M519	M520	M521	M522	M523	M524	M525	M526	M527	M528	M529	M530
M521	M522	M523	M524	M525	M526	M527	M528	M529	M530	M531	M532	M533	M534	M535	M536	M537	M538	M539	M540
M531	M532	M533	M534	M535	M536	M537	M538	M539	M540	M541	M542	M543	M544	M545	M546	M547	M548	M549	M550
M541	M542	M543	M544	M545	M546	M547	M548	M549	M550	M551	M552	M553	M554	M555	M556	M557	M558	M559	M560
M551	M552	M553	M554	M555	M556	M557	M558	M559	M560	M561	M562	M563	M564	M565	M566	M567	M568	M569	M570
M561	M562	M563	M564	M565	M566	M567	M568	M569	M570	M571	M572	M573	M574	M575	M576	M577	M578	M579	M580
M571	M572	M573	M574	M575	M576	M577	M578	M579	M580	M581	M582	M583	M584	M585	M586	M587	M588	M589	M590
M581	M582	M583	M584	M585	M586	M587	M588	M589	M590	M591	M592	M593	M594	M595	M596	M597	M598	M599	M600
M591	M592	M593	M594	M595	M596	M597	M598	M599	M600	M601	M602	M603	M604	M605	M606	M607	M608	M609	M610
M601	M602	M603	M604	M605	M606	M607	M608	M609	M610	M611	M612	M613	M614	M615	M616	M617	M618	M619	M620
M611	M612	M613	M614	M615	M616	M617	M618	M619	M620	M621	M622	M623	M624	M625	M626	M627	M628	M629	M630
M621	M622	M623	M624	M625	M626	M627	M628	M629	M630	M631	M632	M633	M634	M635	M636	M637	M638	M639	M640
M631	M632	M633	M634	M635	M636	M637	M638	M639	M640	M641	M642	M643	M644	M645	M646	M647	M648	M649	M650
M641	M642	M643	M644	M645	M646	M647	M648	M649	M650	M651	M652	M653	M654	M655	M656	M657	M658	M659	M660
M651	M652	M653	M654	M655	M656	M657	M658	M659	M660	M661	M662	M663	M664	M665	M666	M667	M668	M669	M670
M661	M662	M663	M664	M665	M666	M667	M668	M669	M670	M671	M672	M673	M674	M675	M676	M677	M678	M679	M680
M671	M672	M673	M674	M675	M676	M677	M678	M679	M680	M681	M682	M683	M684	M685	M686	M687	M688	M689	M690
M681	M682	M683	M684	M685	M686	M687	M688	M689	M690	M691	M692	M693	M694	M695	M696	M697	M698	M699	M700
M691	M692	M693	M694	M695	M696	M697	M698	M699	M700	M701	M702	M703	M704	M705	M706	M707	M708	M709	M710
M701	M702	M703	M704	M705	M706	M707	M708	M709	M710	M711	M712	M713	M714	M715	M716	M717	M718	M719	M720
M711	M712	M713	M714	M715	M716	M717	M718	M719	M720	M721	M722	M723	M724	M725	M726	M727	M728	M729	M730
M721	M722	M723	M724	M725	M726	M727	M728	M729	M730	M731	M732	M733	M734	M735	M736	M737	M738	M739	M740
M731	M732	M733	M734	M735	M736	M737	M738	M739	M740	M741	M742	M743	M744	M745	M746	M747	M748	M749	M750
M741	M742	M743	M744	M745	M746	M747	M748	M749	M750	M751	M752	M753	M754	M755	M756	M757	M758	M759	M760
M751	M752	M753	M754	M755	M756	M757	M758	M759	M760	M761	M762	M763	M764	M765	M766	M767	M768	M769	M770
M761	M762	M763	M764	M765	M766	M767	M768	M769	M770	M771	M772	M773	M774	M775	M776	M777	M778	M779	M780
M771	M772	M773	M774	M775	M776	M777	M778	M779	M780	M781	M782	M783	M784	M785	M786	M787	M788	M789	M790
M781	M782	M783	M784	M785	M786	M787	M788	M789	M790	M791	M792	M793	M794	M795	M796	M797	M798	M799	M800
M791	M792	M793	M794	M795	M796	M797	M798	M799	M800	M801	M802	M803	M804	M805	M806	M807	M808	M809	M810
M801	M802	M803	M804	M805	M806	M807	M808	M809	M810	M811	M812	M813	M814	M815	M816	M817	M818	M819	M820
M811	M812	M813	M814	M815	M816	M817	M818	M819	M820	M821	M822	M823	M824	M825	M826	M827	M828	M829	M830
M821	M822	M823	M824	M825	M826	M827	M828	M829	M830	M831	M832	M833	M834	M835	M836	M837	M838	M839	M840
M831	M832	M833	M834	M835	M836	M837	M838	M839	M840	M841	M842	M843	M844	M845	M846	M847	M848	M849	M850
M841	M842	M843	M844	M845	M846	M847	M848	M849	M850	M851	M852	M853	M854	M855	M856	M857	M858	M859	M860
M851	M852	M853	M854	M855	M856	M857	M858	M859	M860	M861	M862	M863	M864	M865	M866	M867	M868	M869	M870
M861	M862	M863	M864	M865	M866	M867	M868	M869	M870	M871	M872	M873	M874	M875	M876	M877	M878	M879	M880
M871	M872	M873	M874	M875	M876	M877	M878	M879	M880	M881	M882	M883	M884	M885	M886	M887	M888	M889	M890
M881	M882	M883	M884	M885	M886	M887	M888	M889	M890	M891	M892	M893	M894	M895	M896	M897	M898	M899	M900
M891	M892	M893	M894	M895	M896	M897	M898	M899	M900	M901	M902	M903	M904	M905	M906	M907	M908	M909	M910
M901	M902	M903	M904	M905	M906	M907	M908	M909	M910	M911	M912	M913	M914	M915	M916	M917	M918	M919	M920
M911	M912	M913	M914	M915	M916	M917	M918	M919	M920	M921	M922	M923	M924	M925	M926	M927	M928	M929	M930
M921	M922	M923	M924	M925	M926	M927	M928	M929	M930	M931	M932	M933	M934	M935	M936	M937	M938	M939	M940
M931	M932	M933	M934	M935	M936	M937	M938	M939	M940	M941	M942	M943	M944	M945	M946	M947	M948	M949	M950
M941	M942	M943	M944	M945	M946	M947	M948	M949	M950	M951	M952	M953	M954	M955	M956	M957	M958	M959	M960
M951	M952	M953	M954	M955	M956	M957	M958	M959	M960	M961	M962	M963	M964	M965	M966	M967	M968	M969	M970
M961	M962	M963	M964	M965	M966	M967	M968	M969	M970	M971	M972	M973	M974	M975	M976	M977	M978	M979	M980
M971	M972	M973	M974	M975	M976	M977	M978	M979	M980	M981	M982	M983	M984	M985	M986	M987	M988	M989	M990
M981	M982	M983	M984	M985	M986	M987	M988	M989	M990	M991	M992	M993	M994	M995	M996	M997	M998	M999	M1000
M991	M992	M993	M994	M995	M996	M997	M998	M999	M1000	M1001	M1002	M1003	M1004	M1005	M1006	M1007	M1008	M1009	M1010
M1001	M1																		

Figure 6. Individual peptides that bind to DRB1\*0101



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Figure 7. Individual peptides that bind to DRB1\*0701

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8	M9	M10	M11	M12	M13	M14	M15	M16	M17	M18	M19	M20
M21	A2	A4	A6	A8	A10	A12	A14	A16	A18	A20	A22	A24	A26	A28	A30	A32	A34	A36	A38	A40
M22	A38	A40	A42	A44	A46	A48	A50	A52	A54	A56	A58	A60	A62	A64	A66	A68	A70	A72	A74	A76
M23	A74	A76	A78	A80	A82	A84	A86	A88	A90	A92*	A94	A96	A98	A100	A102	A104	A106	A108	A110	A112
M24	A110	A112	A114	A116	A118	A120	A122	A124	A126	A128	A130	A132	A134	A136	A138	A140	A142	A144	A146	A148
M25	A146	A148	A150	A152	A154	A156	A158	A160	A162	A164	A166	A168	A170	A172	A174	A176	A178	A180	A182	A184
M26	A182	A184	A186	A188	A190	A192	A194	A196	A200	A202	A204	A206	A208	A210	A212	A214	A216	A218	A220	A222
M27	A218	A220	A222	A224	A226	A228	A230	A232	A234	A236	A238	A240	A242	A244	A246	A248	A250	A252	A254	A256
M28	A254	A256	A258	A260	A262	A264	A266	A268	A270	A272	A274	A276	B2	B4	B6	B8	B10	B12	B14	B16
M29	B14	B16	B18	B20	B22	B24	B26	B28	B30	B32*	B34	B36	B38	B40	B42	B44	B46	B48	B50	B52
M30	B50	B52	B54	B56	B58	B60	B62	B64	B66	B68	B70	B72*	B74	B76	B78	B80	B82	B84	B86	B88
M31	B86	B88	B90	B92	B94	B96	B98	B100	B102	B104	B106	B108	B110	B112	B114	B116	B118	B120	B122	B124
M32	C2	C4	C6	C8	C10	C12	C14	C16	C18	C20	C22	C24	C26	C28	C30	C32	C34	C36	C38	C40
M33	C38	C40	C42	C44	C46	C48	C50	C52	C54	C56	C58	C60	C62	C64	C66	C68	C70	C72	C74	C76
M34	C74	C76	C78	C80	C82	C84	C86	C88	C90	C92	C94	C96	C98	C100	C102	C104	C106	C108	C110	C112
M35	C102	C104	C106	C108	C110	C112	C114	C116	C118	C120	C122	C124	C126	C128	C130	C132	C134	C136	C138	C140
M36	C124	C126	C128	C130	C132	C134	C136	C138	C140	C142	C144	C146	C148	C150	C152	C154	C156	C158	C160	C162
M37	C138	C140	C142	C144	C146	C148	C150	C152	C154	C156	C158	C160	C162	C164	C166	C168	C170	C172	C174	C176
M38	C156	C158	C160	C162	C164	C166	C168	C170	C172	C174	C176	C178	C180	C182	C184	C186	C188	C190	C192	C194
M39	C176	C178	C180	C182	C184	C186	C188	C190	C192	C194	C196	C198	C200	C202	C204	C206	C208	C210	C212	C214
M40	C202	C204	C206	C208	C210	C212	C214	C216	C218	C220	C222	C224	C226	C228	C230	C232	C234	C236	C238	C240

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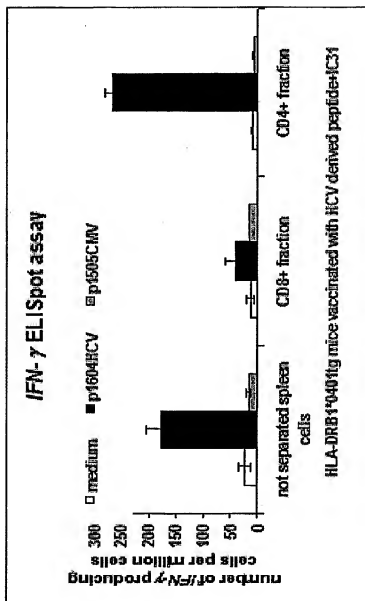


Fig.8

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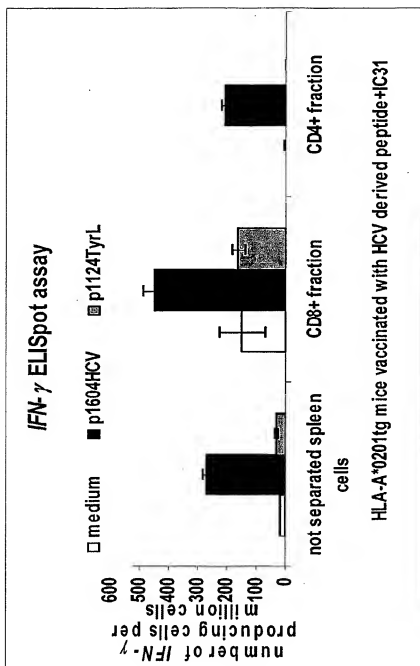


Fig.9



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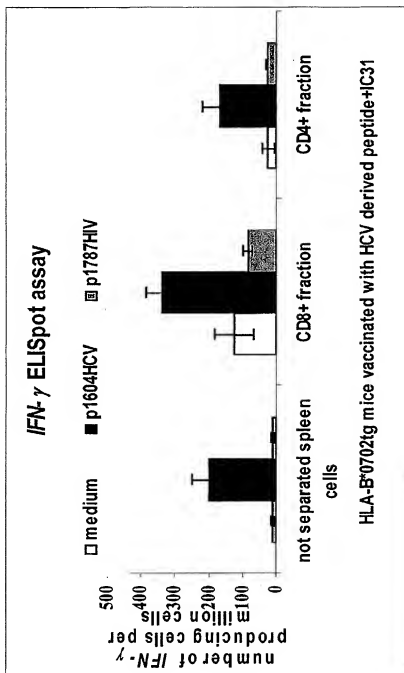


Fig.10